Miss Parkworth and Three Short Stories

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Miss Parkworth

MISS PARKWORTH

AND THREE SHORT STORIES

Some Tributes to the Work of EDWARD C. BOOTH

"MR. BOOTH'S *delineations of these Holderness people is, to a reviewer who has been reading novels daily for years, the truest and most humorous picture of country life since the earlier novels of* GEORGE ELIOT."—DR. ERNEST BAKER *in* THE ATHENÆUM.

"*What* HARDY *is to Wessex, what* GEORGE ELIOT *is to the Midlands, that is* MR. BOOTH *to the East Riding of Yorkshire.*"—BIRMINGHAM POST.

"MR. BOOTH *has got the accents, the types, the manners, the gossip of Yorkshire rural life to perfection—and style to make all these things tell.*"—SUNDAY TIMES.

"*. . . His use of its dialect is a triumph. Never do we remember to have reposed upon the speech of a novelist's characters with a more delightful sense of security.*"—THE OUTLOOK.

"MR. BOOTH *is, without question, one of the leading writers of the twentieth century. His are books to revolve in the mental mouth, extracting the succulence of their literary juices long after the books themselves have been laid aside. For sheer beauty, intimacy, courage and descriptive might,* MR. BOOTH'S *pen is impossible to excel. His is a large canvas and his palette is familiar with every colouring of the human circumstance.*"—RICHARD ARR *in the* CIVILIAN.

"*Not everybody can use the grand manner in fiction, as he does, without evoking protest—but* MR. BOOTH'S *spaciousness and tremendous ease are fully justified in the result. It is strong and able work in every way, carried out according to the standards of what is greatest in fiction and likeliest to endure.*"—PALL MALL GAZETTE.

"*Holderness has long been intimately associated with fiction and its writers.* ANTHONY TROLLOPE *was once concerned very deeply with one part of Holderness.* MISS BRADDON, *on the same ground, wrote her first novel. But it must be admitted that the most imposing and elaborate literary tributes that have been laid at the shrine of this —as we think, and as the novelists think—romantic corner of the East Riding, are those of* MR. EDWARD BOOTH."—THE EASTERN MORNING NEWS.

THE MORNING POST (E. B. OSBORN), *in an article on Yorkshire novelists, says :* "*A few names will be inscribed there—and in the biggest type of all,* MR. EDWARD BOOTH'S. *He has a gift of description, touched with humour at times, which is as rich and resourceful as the countryside it depicts.*"

"*He is one of the greatest artists of our time.*"—T. P. O'CONNOR *in* CASSELL'S WEEKLY.

MISS PARKWORTH

And THREE SHORT STORIES

By EDWARD C. BOOTH

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Miss Parkworth

I

THE new maid was to arrive at three o'clock, and Miss Parkworth took up a discreet position in the front sitting-room behind the starched curtains to watch for her coming. To see without being seen is to furnish oneself with weapons plucked from the armament of an adversary. Much may be learned from looks unguarded, from a face unsuspicious of observation, from a mien and carriage free from all constraint. Every now and then Miss Parkworth turned a sharp eye to the clock, for, having time in such abundance on her hands, her sense of punctuality was acute. She would sit an hour in expectation of a minute, but by the time that minute fell due her patience was exhausted and she would exclaim: "How much longer am I to be kept waiting? I am accustomed to punctuality, and punctuality I will have."

Nor was it the respect of punctuality alone that weighed with her. Her curiosities had been on edge all day to see once more the maid whom she had interviewed a week ago, and to compare remembrance with reality. The choosing of a maid is a most solemn and responsible charge. She had chosen many, and suffered much and grievous disillusionment. Her faith in maids was dwindled to a finger's breadth. They had imposed upon her faith too grossly. She had engaged red cheeks of health and been confronted by

the pallor of anæmia. Girls whose sheer robustness had prevailed upon her better judgment at a first interview came shrunk to half their size. They seemed imbued with every artifice to delude the senses and mock selection. Tall girls had grown short and neat girls slatternly, and the demeanour of a face that had persuaded her by dint of its decorum arrived stripped of everything down to a naked and unblushing effrontery, with falsehood stamped upon the brow and insolence upon the lips. Never had she engaged a maid of recent years but that at once she doubted.

At three minutes to the hour the figure so long and so impatiently awaited came into sight. It came into sight accompanied by a second figure, the bond of union between them being a tin box, grotesquely corded. One glance sufficed to show the watcher that in all essential features the girl was dressed as on the first occasion. No attempt at deception had apparently been practised here. But in the free hand which she waved as counterpoise to the supporting of her end of the trunk she bore a cardboard hat-box, and Miss Parkworth speculated darkly as to the sort of hat it hid. For she would not have any overdressing on the part of her maids. No, she would not have it. She would not have them going out from this house of hers and coming back to it in colours quite unsuited to their station and the work they were supposed to do. From the moment that servant-maids began to think about their personal appearance outside the house they lost all thought of their work and duty in it. The house became as naught to them. They were for ever in their bedrooms, or staring out of

windows when her back was turned. She would not have them in their bedrooms. She would not have them staring out of windows. No, she would not have it. It brought the house into discredit. It gave it a bad name. People would say : " Whatever is Miss Parkworth thinking of to allow such carryings-on ! "

Yet more disturbing than the hat which the new maid wore or the hat she carried in the cardboard box was the male figure by which she came accompanied. It appeared, so far as Miss Parkworth was able to observe through the starched pattern of the curtain, to be young enough to give justification for the darkest surmise. On the occasion of the girl's first coming she had arrived in the care of her own mother, an elderly, careworn countrywoman devoid of teeth, who had shown herself acutely sensible of the manifold advantages awaiting her daughter in such a home as this, beneath such wise guidance and ripe supervision, and had given Miss Parkworth every reasonable pledge of the girl's gratitude and good behaviour.

" She ought to be thankful'm," this mother had affirmed, " to get the chance of such a place. It's more than what *I* got when *I* went out to service. If she does what you bid her and takes notice of all you say, it ought to be the making of her." Nor had the girl's mother sought to conceal anything of her daughter's true character. She had been commendably frank in regard to the girl's shortcomings. " She's been used to hard work," she assured Miss Parkworth, " ever since she was of a size to nurse her sister or lift a bucket'm. But I won't pretend she's fond of it. She isn't'm. In fact, me and her's had words about

it. But in a strange house, with somebody that isn't her own mother, I'm hoping—why, I'm sure—she'll be different. She'll see it's for her own good. She'll do her best to try and please you. Now won't you ? " she had asked her daughter, and her daughter had said a crushed and humble " Yes " beneath her breath.

" Aye, that she will'm," the mother had protested. " You needn't be afraid she won't. She's a good little worker when she likes. And you mustn't be afraid to *make* her an' all. Nobody would work if they wasn't forced. It's for her own good. She knows that. Don't you ? " She had turned to the girl again, and—tight pressed between her mother's look and Miss Parkworth's relentless eye—the girl subscribed a docile " Yes."

" Aye, that she does'm," the mother had averred. As for her daughter's truthfulness, her punctuality, her tidiness, her powers of early rising, in respect of all these most important subjects she had testified with rare candour and persuasive common sense. She had endowed her daughter with no end of faults, but they were all (mercifully) remediable. And she had delegated as much power to the prospective mistress as the most arbitrary ruler might require.

" Don't be frightened to speak to her'm," she had told Miss Parkworth. " She'll take notice of what *you* tell her, I know. If she doesn't do her work to suit you, make her do it over while she does. It's you that's mistress, not her. She knows it'm. You know it, don't you ? Speak, then ! Aye, she says yes'm. She knows it. An' she'll be a good girl and try her best Now won't you ? What ? Aye.

Listen. She says she will'm. I'll see she comes on Thursday. An' I won't forget the caps. Two you said'm? I thought so. An' the aprons. Very like I shall come with her an' all, if work'll only let me."

The promise had been no more specific than that, yet Miss Parkworth had suffered confidence to repose upon it. There were many things which, on reflection, she would have wished to emphasise to a mother of such gratifying common sense; many points of duty she would have wished to impress upon this new servant in the presence of a witness so partial to authority, who might attest the girl's intelligence. "Aye, she understands'm. She says she will. Why, it's only right she should. It's for her good. She knows that. Don't you? Speak, then. There! She says yes. She says she does'm. You'll have no trouble with her. I've spoke to her very serious, and she's promised me she'll do her best. Be strict with her'm and don't give in to her."

II

For such a wise interpreter of obligations this figure of the male sex was, in truth, no reassuring substitute. The moment that the corded trunk was lowered to the ground he put one foot upon the nearest corner and lit the remnant of a cigarette. Miss Parkworth was not narrow-minded. Indeed, she admitted it herself. "Thank goodness," she would say, "I am not narrow-minded. Nobody can accuse me of that." And she had no bigoted dislike of smoking. That is to say, in reason and moderation and at the suitable time. But

of cigarettes she held a poor opinion. They represented tobacco in its most dissolute form; and when men thrust them between their lips and smoked into the faces of young girls they lent the smoker's mouth an insolent and too familiar expression—as if he knew more than was good for either of them. Her dislike of such an act was only exceeded by her disgust at the complacency of her own sex that permitted it. The smoker, with his foot upon the edge of the tin trunk, smoked as if both maid and trunk belonged to him, and the girl listened to his conversation with an interest so intent, and such a disregard of time and the errand she was on, as goaded Miss Parkworth's patience to exasperation.

"What! Has she no more sense," she exclaimed, "than to stand talking in the open street, for everybody to look at, within fifty yards of my own door? How much longer does she mean to keep me waiting at this window?" The church clock chiming out the hour of three supplied the answer to her question, for the sound broke up the girl's complacency as if it had been a thing of plaster. She seized her end of the rope with a quick movement of alarm.

"Ah! I think so indeed!" Miss Parkworth declared, folding her arms and drawing back her head with triumphant appreciation. "And not before time! A nice sort of servant to send on an errand, to be sure. I see I shall have to smarten you up considerably, young woman, if you are to suit Me."

She withdrew from the curtain as the couple drew nearer, bearing the box unequally between them, and from the farther side of the room watched them pass

the window with a sort of syncopated movement. Before the door the girl let down her end of the trunk upon the pavement and stared at the house and its immediate neighbours with an uncertain eye.

"I think it's this one," she said to her companion vaguely.

"*Think* it's this one!" Miss Parkworth echoed in a voice of irritation and contempt. "Why, she *knows* it's this one. She was here only a week ago. If that's the sort of memory the girl's got I'm going to have trouble with her. But she's not thinking about *me* at all. I can see that clearly. Her head's too full of other things."

The girl's companion took this opportunity of respite to put the charred remnant of the cigarette once more between his lips. In motion he had carried it extended in his disengaged hand as the girl did the cardboard box.

"Is it?" he asked, in a tone of such inconsequence as caused Miss Parkworth's blood to boil. "Go on then. Try it. If it isn't you can knock next door."

Was this, she asked herself, the sort of way for any responsible maid to take up a new situation? And who was this man who smoked before her front door as if it marked a public-house, and told her own servant to "Go on! Try it!"? She felt it almost an indignity to have to acknowledge a knock imbued with so little sense of responsibility and respect, but she laid hands of strictness on her plastered hair and imposed severity on her blouse and skirt, and hardened her mouth as she flung open the door.

"So it's you," she said after a pause. "I had

begun to think you weren't coming. Well!" she added, with a tinge of asperity, for the maid stood on the pavement without response, as if unsure what movement were expected of her, "aren't you going to bring your box in?" Instantly, albeit still silent, the girl stooped to the cord once more, and her companion, taking two puffs at his cigarette in quick succession to complete it, for the stump was now burnt down to his lips, cast the residue into the roadway behind him. Perhaps Miss Parkworth's eyes and posture daunted his effrontery, as she intended they should, for he wilted visibly beneath her supervision, and lost much of the assurance that he had shown when he stood with one foot upon the box.

"Can you manage?" he asked the girl, in an uneasy undertone.

"Aye, I can now," she answered.

"Here, let's give you a lift on to the step with it," he volunteered, and Miss Parkworth made way, standing back some inches in the narrow passage and bestowing on the proceedings a fixed gaze that burned with the lurid intensity of a torch upheld.

"There!" he said, with a foot in the passage, and, roused to further willingness by the fact that Miss Parkworth offered no demur, added: "Shall I take it upstairs for you?"

What! Take up this box into the maid's bedroom? Miss Parkworth's propriety, already outraged, caught fire. She would have no strange men admitted to the maid's bedroom under any pretext. No, she would not. She would not have the two of them up there alone, and it was out of the question that she should

accompany them. Too many mistresses had been abused. Even plumbers were not to be trusted. The slowness of their work too often cloaked design. She knew cases where——

"Put the box down!" she ordered, with a peremptory voice. "And leave it—thank you." She said "Thank you" in no tone of gratitude, but exploded the locution point-blank in the bearer's ears as if it had been a pistol. It was a verbal *coup de grâce*, and the soul of willingness to serve, wounded in its vitals, gave up the ghost. The man dropped his end of the trunk at once and beat one palm against the other with a dusty movement of finality. "Right oh!" he told the girl under his breath. "Be good!" And dived off the doorstep, impelled by the pressure of Miss Parkworth's eye, like a hesitating swimmer pushed off the springboard.

"Who's that?" Miss Parkworth enquired sharply as he went.

The girl said with confusion, "Which? Him? I don't know'm."

"Don't know!" Miss Parkworth repeated. "How do you mean 'don't know'? He appears to be an acquaintance of yours. Do you mean it's some man you engaged to help you from the station with your box?" The alternative came to her as an ugly afterthought, stinging her with the apprehension of many dark surmises wasted. "Is that what you mean?"

"He spoke to me'm," the girl said.

"Spoke to you? What—a stranger? Why should he speak to you? Strange men do not usually speak

to young girls without encouragement. And if they do, no notice ought certainly to be taken of them. No strange man would dare to speak to me. He would know better. How did this man come to speak to you? Where?"

"In street," the girl replied. "I was trying to carry box myself, and he offers to give me a hand with it. He caught hold of cord before I could stop him——" She was attempting to justify delinquency now, realising that she stood condemned in her mistress's judgment, and Miss Parkworth was aware of it. She looked fixedly at the girl's face, and the girl's eyes shifted. In that moment she caught the quick flash of deceitfulness. She was sure of it. The girl was not altogether to be trusted.

"I shall have to keep a close watch on her," she warned herself. "She will take advantage of me if I show the least weakness." Aloud she said in tones of disfavour: "I do not approve of young girls allowing themselves to be spoken to by strange men, particularly when they are going into a situation. It is most improper. He was certainly not the sort of man for a young girl like you to have anything to do with. If ever you meet him again, remember I forbid you to speak to him."

She used the word "young" as a substitute for any adjective inferring good looks. No servants, in Miss Parkworth's estimation, were ever good-looking. The term was never intended to be applied to them. She would not have good-looking servants in her house. To have a good-looking maidservant going in and out of a house let the tone of the whole house down.

People began to stare at the house. Men looked up at all the windows in going by. It became positively unpleasant for a mistress to sit behind her own curtains. She had even known such houses to become notorious, and the name of a mistress shamefully associated with the identity of a servant whose good looks were the scandal of the street. Nobody knew or sought to know the servant's name ; she enjoyed a flagrant anonymity ; it was the unoffending mistress who bore all the public odium for her carryings-on. "Mrs. So-and-so's maid!" "That maid of Mrs. So-and-so!"

Wherefore Miss Parkworth had absolutely refused to engage any maid with the least pretention to good looks. Almost her first enquiry at the registry office was : "What sort of a looking girl is she?" and if the proprietress too thoughtlessly replied : "Oh, she's a very nice-looking girl," Miss Parkworth retorted peremptorily : "Then she won't suit *me*. I don't want nice-looking girls. I want respectable-looking girls. I want servants."

Such a rigid standpoint was full of difficulties, for it is obvious that nature cannot make every servant plain, however hard she try. Some by accident, and others through perversity, must needs come very near to prettiness. But nature is marvellously accommodating, and by dint of a lifelong refusal to acknowledge good looks in maidservants Miss Parkworth's eye had attained a standard of perception of its own. Good looks themselves it never saw ; it only saw the foolish aspiration to attain them. She would have set her face against youth as well if it had been possible, for

she felt an instinctive hostility when she came in contact with it. She would have suffered no young people in her service ; she would have suffered none but women of maturity, whose faces had shed the last glamour of illusion and owned no life or hope beyond the domestic world they worked in. But old age had its vices, too. Its prejudices were brittle ; they broke sooner than bend to any will beyond their own. Old age had lived long enough, it seemed, to deny superiority of wisdom to years alone. Her own years had no purchase over it. Besides, it had afflictions—sick headaches and bilious attacks and crises of temper, and too many susceptibilities to be considered. Youth, for all its faults, was malleable, and after some trying experiences of maturity at its worst she had reverted acridly to youth as to the lesser of two evils. When she drew herself up to her full height and made her muscles rigid and said : " Hush ! Do you hear me ! Have you forgotten who it is you are speaking to ? " youth was (usually) silent. Maturity knew no such limitation. It would not be hushed. It refused to be silenced to extinction. It muttered. Even when it ceased to mutter audibly its lips moved. And then again, the things that youth in its effrontery might say bore their own condemnation. They were the precocious fruit of inexperience and unwisdom. But the insolence of maturity was calculated and unpardonable. Its mouth shot ruthless arrows—words barbed and sharpened that, even though extracted, left dreadful wounds behind. It was not true to say that single ladies were peculiar in their ways. She denied it indignantly. They were not peculiar in their

ways. They were not sharp-tempered ; they were not difficult to please ; they were not bad to get on with ; soured, narrow-minded. It was monstrous to suggest such things. Wickedest of all was it to say that single ladies hated married women and could think of nothing but the husbands they had failed to get and the children they had never borne. It was not every woman who sought the married state. Many of them elected voluntarily to be single. Life held, surely, higher, nobler paths for women than mere marriage and maternity—religion, charitable works, parochial duties, the care of the sick, the supervision of the young. Take, for instance—her own case. But no. She would not condescend to justify herself before such vile traducers. Let them go. Let her be rid of them. She would not have them in her house. No, she would not have them—these full-grown creatures of her own sex whose years and hardships should have taught them better than to bite the hand that fed them. After all, since she must be served by one age or the other, let her take youth. Youth, at least, was sayable. Its embers of resistance could be trodden out beneath a firm foot, extinguished like a smouldering candle by the strong breath of authority. " Hush ! How dare you speak so to me ! Remember the years between us. You are but a child. Be silent."

III

Her Christian name was Doris, but Miss Parkworth had told the girl's mother quite plainly, as soon as she heard it, that this name would not suit her. " It is not," she declared, " a name that I should ever consent

to call any servant of mine. In fact, it is not a proper servant's name at all." And she had let it be distinctly seen that the name was a Difficulty.

" It's no difficulty as far as I'm concerned, mum," the girl's mother had assured her. " Nor yet so far as she's concerned. Call her any name you like'm that suits you. It'll suit her just as well. She knows it's for her good. Don't you? Speak, then! Aye, she says yes'm. She says she does. It's for you to choose'm ; not her. It's you that pays her wages and has to call her by it. Call her any name you've got a fancy for."

" It is not a question of fancy," Miss Parkworth had retorted with more than a tincture of reproof. " It is a question of propriety—and common sense."

" Why, to be sure it is," the obliging mother had agreed. " You know a deal better what's right'm, and what ought to be done than her—that's only going out into her first situation. It was her father' sister' name, that died'm. That's why we called her it. Why, to tell the truth we didn't know *what* to call her. We had to call her something. So we called her that. But call her what suits you'm."

" I will think about it," said Miss Parkworth.

And she thought about it long and often, without avail, exclaiming to herself at odd moments with the tartness of perplexity : " What *am* I to call the girl? Really to goodness—— It's not the duty of a mistress to find names for her servants. They ought to be properly provided with them before they leave home. I don't know what things are coming to. There'll soon be no servants left."

For selection was not easy. So many names, eminently suitable in themselves, had been tainted for all time by predecessors. Anne was anathema, the symbol of everything false and underhand. Eliza typified untidiness. Jane was a sluggard who would have slept until the Day of Judgment and stubbornly resisted every effort to arouse her. Against the name of Mary serious objections were registered. It had two syllables; it could not be uttered peremptorily enough, and it was untrustworthy. Still, some name had obviously to be chosen, and as a measure of despair Miss Parkworth selected this. "Your name," she told the new maid as soon as she had uncorded the tin trunk in her attic bedroom and come down for inspection in all the panoply of print, "will be Mary. I hope you will try and show yourself worthy of it." The maid dropped her underlip at the announcement, as if she had been struck on the head with a battledore, and said after a moment's hesitation: "Thank you'm."

Now a maid, as every mistress knows, is not the work of a week—or of a fortnight. Months go to the making of her. She has to be lifted out of the dull lump like bread from dough. She has to be carved out of the shapeless block like statuary from marble. Such virtues as she ultimately shows are no more native to her flesh and blood than texts and epitaphs to tombstones. They must be chiselled there by skill and diligence. Hours of patient toil, of indefatigable chipping, go to the incision of a single serif.

For a month Miss Parkworth laboured at the great creative task before her, striving out of the inert

substance underneath her hand to evoke the living lineaments of the ideal servant-maid. At times, albeit schooling herself against the least elation, the least indulgence of precarious hope, and taking care to let no sign be seen that might betray a favourable opinion to the new maid and ruin all, she saw, or seemed to see, indications of promise in the deep bosom of the imperfect mass. The girl was no paragon, to be sure. She was compliant to a fault, giving in to a word, yet never yielding ; soft as butter, withal not hardening to any consistency that preserved in it the lasting impress of Miss Parkworth's will. At first Miss Parkworth had decided that her servant's mouth was weak. " She has no character," she told herself, " no backbone. She yields to any influence. I see I shall have to be always at her heels." And the girl's eyes, too, of a pale blue that Miss Parkworth designated a " washed-out colour " and of a lymphatic softness that Miss Parkworth described as " watery," testified, in her opinion, to a lack of moral strength. " She is the sort of girl who would be easily led." Led, that is to say, by any but a mistress ; by any but wise counsellors ; by any influence but the right one. For girls who are easily led are hard to govern, as Miss Parkworth had discovered to her cost. And then, again, the girl's lashes were too long. Miss Parkworth suspected girls whose eyes she could not very plainly see when she looked at them. She did not like to have these gauges of mood and character hid from observation by long lashes or lowered lids. She was not sure, she could not quite make up her mind ; vague doubts and dire suspicions blew at times across her mind's composure as to

whether the new maid set a value on her personal appearance. "Does the girl fancy herself, I wonder?" Miss Parkworth had speculated in moments of perplexity, and had dismissed the suggestion as ridiculous. "Surely! A girl like *her*. She can't be so absurd. It's out of the question." And yet, as stern experience had taught her, servant-maids were foolish enough for anything. Beneath the stillness of the shallowest demeanour depths of unsuspected cunning lay. Who should say that this meek and guileless-looking creature did not make a curtain of docility to hide from sight the things suspicion sought to see? She breathed her "No'ms" and "Yes'ms" almost tremblingly. Her face showed at times so childish in its seeming artlessness that Miss Parkworth even doubted if the girl's mother, despite her convincing common sense and frankness, had been truthful on the subject of her age.

"How old do you say you are?" she taxed the girl one day abruptly, and fastened an unflinching eye upon the girl's lips.

"Seventeen'm," the girl replied.

"Are you sure you are seventeen?"

"Yes'm."

"Your mother told me you were eighteen."

"I'm going on eighteen," the girl explained.

"Going on eighteen isn't eighteen," Miss Parkworth declared. "I knew very well you couldn't be eighteen. When is your birthday?"

The girl was not quite certain. She thought it was in November. It was either in October or December; she couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was her sister that

had her birthday in October. She knew it was one of them. But their names was all set down in the Bible at home'm. Her mother had had them all wrote in. Her mother would know'm.

The testimony of the family Bible did something to allay Miss Parkworth's misgivings, albeit she declared it to be a strange idea (to her) that a girl should not make a point of learning the date of her own birthday. "To me it suggests carelessness," she said. "These are things that surely nobody ought to forget. If they do it's because they've deliberately not given their mind."

Seventeen and three-quarters or eighteen—in whichever the truth might be—the girl looked singularly youthful for her age. It must be due, Miss Parkworth decided, to one of two things: either to artlessness or cunning. At a word, at a look from her mistress, the new maid's cheek showed nothing but a blank of innocence. In vain Miss Parkworth sought to surprise upon the countenance some tell-tale flicker of sophistication, however fugitive; some glint of knowledge in the pale-blue eyes, or hint of hard experience in the soft mouth. The meekness of the one and the innocence of the others frustrated all her efforts. They seemed like a rebuff to her sagacity. She had always prided herself on her power to "see through" servant-maids. Why, then, though she saw through this one, was there nothing to see? Surely the girl could not be *all* she seemed?

Yet of what did she suspect the new maid? Ah! That was it; that was the trouble of it. All her suspicions were humming like telegraph wires in air quickened by nothing but its own keenness. If for

awhile she let her vigilance relax it was only to disarm suspicion on the other side ; to create an atmosphere of unalertness in which temerity might stumble. She feigned tranquillity for the same reason that judges feign somnolence—the better to trip an argument unwary or grown overbold. In a world where all conduct is subject to suspicion and deceptiveness the smoothest surface should be no less keenly scanned than the rough. Pots are tested by the knuckles, and coins are rung and sounded, and cautious lips decide if the white grains be salt or sugar. No prudent cook or housewife takes things for granted ; nor do the things themselves confess their own nature save by strict test compelled. That was Miss Parkworth's doctrine. She applied the lesson of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins to her management of servants, and kept the lamp of vigilance perpetually trimmed, and ready for the call that must assuredly be made upon it.

IV

Noisy the girl was not. Miss Parkworth detested nothing more than noisy maids. Indeed, she would not have them in her house. No, she would not. Maids who sang, and trod their way heavily up and down the staircase even when they carried coals, without regard to decency or the carpet, had no right to be in respectable service.

Against the new maid no such charge could certainly be levelled. If anything, if there *were* such a fault as noiselessness, this maid possessed it. There was

something even a little sly (to Miss Parkworth's way of thinking) in the girl's movements. She stole up and down the staircase like a shadow. It was not always possible to tell, save by a sudden appeal to the girl's name: "Mary! Whereabouts are you?" whereabouts she really was. For the very moment after Miss Parkworth could have sworn she heard the maid stirring in the kitchen the voice—to her astonishment—would reach her from afar: "I'm here'm."

"Here? Where's here?"

"On the landing'm."

"On the landing? Goodness! What are you doing on the landing? Who told you to go there?"

"I'm going to my room'm."

"To your room? Whatever for?"

"To fetch a hankercher'm."

"Really, girl! Didn't you bring one with you when you came downstairs this morning?"

"I forgot'm."

"Forgot! I declare! What a memory you have, to be sure! Go and fetch it then. Be quick with you. I want to have you down here. I don't want you to make a practice of going up to your bedroom. It's a very bad habit."

Periodically, when the maid was out upon an errand, Miss Parkworth visited her bedroom with rapid foot and judicial eye and nose. It was a mistress's unchallengeable right. Nay, it was her solemn duty to supervise the servant's work in every corner of the house. And what so important as the servant's bedroom? Dreadful discoveries might be made there. Dreadful discoveries had been made there. Fluff

beneath the bed; crumbs and match-stalks on the floor; a day's slops unemptied; trashy books left lying on the dressing-table; orange and banana skins upon the washstand; face creams; cheap and nauseating scents. Was there anything which furnished so sure an idex to the character of a servant as the room she slept in?

Yet there was nothing in the new maid's bedroom of a nature either to dull suspicion or to sharpen it. Miss Parkworth opened one after another the drawers of the painted dresser; turned the contents over with a light but critical and practised hand; lifted the lid of the tin trunk; turned up the edges of the two skirts that hung from their pegs beneath a dust-coverlet of cretonne. Nothing. No, nothing. Too little, indeed. So little as to make Miss Parkworth fear her maid was deep. To be sure, there were two funeral cards at the bottom of the tin trunk, deeply bordered in black, embellished with angelic trumpets, texts, and hymnal verses. But they were of ancient date, and one of them referred (in all probability) to the girl's grandmother, who had passed away (it seemed) at the ripe age of eighty-nine, after a long and painful illness patiently endured. The card touched Miss Parkworth in her tender parts. Her own mother had died at the age of seventy-three. Life seemed very unequal. But she put the card and mellowing emotions from her. Sentiment was wasted upon servant-maids. Who should say for what deep purpose these cards had been laid within the trunk, in a spot so accessible to eye and finger? Not for such a cause as this must vigilance relax. They were no more to be relied on by a mistress

than hymn-books and Bibles. A much surer guidepost to the goal she sought might have been furnished by a small wooden box, decorated with a varnished picture lid, which reposed in the long drawer beneath articles of underwear. But it was locked. That fact alone sufficed to excite suspicion—sharpened with natural resentment of a state of things reflecting so unpleasantly on her own probity. For why should this box be locked? A respectable, self-respecting servant should have nothing to conceal. Miss Parkworth objected intensely to locked boxes. In the first place, they constituted an affront to a mistress. And then this box—whose lid yielded, to be sure, a little, though not enough—seemed so curiously out of character with the simplicity of the girl's appearance and the trustfulness of her eyes. It was the sort of box, for instance, that might have given lodgment to surreptitious curling-tongs, to bottles of cheap scent, to face-creams, hair-wavers, clandestine correspondence, and who knows what forbidden foibles that rob a maid of her efficiency and self-respect. Yet it confided nothing of its secret to the nose when supplicated, or to the attentive ear when shaken, or to the eye when through the precarious crevice between lid and lock Miss Parkworth sought to probe the coffer's purpose. She replaced the box at length with the dignity befitting frustration. This fragile casket, so weak and yielding, for ever on the point of giving way, and yet, with meekest obstinacy, holding firm, was surely characteristic of its owner. Not for nothing had the new maid locked it. She had her secrets, then. Be very sure.

V

Miss Parkworth gave her servants every liberty that proper-minded maids could ask for or mistresses permit; that is to say, one night out each week, in addition to Sunday evening. Such an allowance, she admitted sadly, was in excess of reason. But times had changed, and mistresses against their better judgment had been forced to change with them. The mischief was wrought, and mistresses could only bow to it. Miss Parkworth did her best by counsel and by precept to teach her servants the undesirability of nights out, but she spoke to the deaf ears of a pleasure-seeking age. Even the new maid, for all she hearkened humbly to Miss Parkworth's word, and said "Yes 'm" to her every warning, went out just the same. Prompt to the minute she stole upstairs to change; prompt to the minute she rapped with discreet and deferential knuckles at the sitting-room door, and said in an exasperating voice that dissimulated every trace of eagerness, a wan voice that seemed to float from joyless lips like the ghost of resignation:

"I'm ready to go out now'm, please."

Oh, it tried Miss Parkworth beyond the limit of endurance at times, this palpable elimination of all personal feeling from the announcement, as though the messenger betold a melancholy duty rather than the pursuit of her own particular and utterly selfish pleasure. There was no argument upon the point, she knew. It was the night covenanted and agreed. Whether she willed or not, this night had been contracted for; it was in the bargain; it owed nothing now to her favour or goodwill. Maids took their nights out

in these days as of right, and never thanked a mistress for them.

" Well, I suppose you'll have to go then," was all she said. Yet the recipient of this sanction knew better than to retire at once. She waited for the inevitable formula :

" Stop ! Come here. Let me have a look at you before you go."

For would Miss Parkworth let a maid of hers walk out into the public street unscrutinised ? Not she. She knew too much of servant-maids to sanction such a thing. When servant-maids went out of her front door (as on their going-out nights they did) they took all the reputation of their mistress and the credit of the house they lived in with them. It was not *their* credit (as often she had been at pains to make them comprehend) that she thought about ; it was her own. " If it was only yourself," she had said, " and *your* goings-on that counted, it wouldn't matter. In anybody else's service you might do what you pleased for what I cared. But it isn't you that counts or gets the blame. It's me. People would ask whatever I was thinking of to allow "—such hair, or hats, or high-heeled shoes, as the case might be. No. Before they left her house they must come into her presence ; they must cower before the tribunal of her eye ; they must run the gauntlet of her criticism. " You're surely never going out in those shoes again—after what you heard me say about them ! " " Whatever possessed you to buy that dreadful hat I can't imagine. It's positively not respectable. Turn round. If I didn't think so ! You haven't taken out those flowers as I

told you. It's not a bit of use me speaking. Really, I've a good mind not to let you go out at all. You pay not the least attention to my wishes."

For that reason, and for many reasons—all of them drawn from dark experience—Miss Parkworth took her invariable seat by the window in the front sitting-room on the evenings of her maids' nights out. It was there, to the panel of the door, that scores of quaking knuckles had applied. Three times were her maids passed through the crucible of Miss Parkworth's eye—the first time in the room itself, lit by all the light that fell upon them from the deep bay window. "Come here with you! Don't stand in the doorway where I can't see you." The second time when they shut the front door behind them and emerged self-consciously into the street. The third and last time when they returned. To a practised and observant eye three times taught much. They taught it very, very much. True, they taught it nothing that it did not know. There was little indeed they *could* teach such an eye, that seemed to have exhausted every conceivable possibility in the character and composition of servant-maids.

For instance, this matter of the maids' night out. Some mistresses might be tempted to exclaim: "Goodness gracious! Does Miss Parkworth actually allow her maids to use the front door? Whoever heard of such a thing! What in the name of fortune can she be thinking of?"

Miss Parkworth was thinking of many things. Since an evening when the cold draught, under providence, had led to the exposure of the most plausible

of maids, Miss Parkworth placed no confidence in back doors. They seemed to exercise a demoralising influence over servants. Their fascination was fatal. And Miss Parkworth's back door was dangerously placed, for it let out of a bricked yard into a long and narrow lane, flanked by a couple of dozen doors as dangerous, and faced by a high brick wall with a stone coping that made a perfect avenue for vice. In such an area of temptation half-measures were worse than useless. The moment mistresses played fast and loose with back doors let them fold their hands and sit resigned to all that happened. If they thought anything about their own comfort or the character of their servants they must keep their back doors locked, as Miss Parkworth did. Yes, and bolted. Whether it was coal, or milk, or groceries, or the dustman, the back door was only opened as required and locked again the moment after. As for the key, it had its proper place appointed on a nail beside the kitchen door, where one swift glance could snatch assurance of its safety. To lay it elsewhere, even for a moment, was to break one of Miss Parkworth's most solemn laws. Unless the key hung in its place there dwelt no peace within the house. She would not have the key removed. No, she would not. If they could not respect their mistress's instructions in this matter they would have to Go.

VI

Nothing depressed Miss Parkworth quite so much as these nights out. For one thing, all her wisdom, all her prudence, all her thirty years' experience opposed

them. They were a bad influence for maids. One night out did a girl more harm than a week's vigilance could repair. And then—there seemed something so intrinsically selfish about them. After all the pains she had bestowed upon a maid, working with her, toiling with her, these nights out savoured of ingratitude. Maids never seemed to think that whilst they sought their pleasure in heaven knows what questionable quarters of the town their mistress was constrained to sit alone in her own house, watching and waiting, watching and waiting, until the hour of their return. No, it never occurred to them. They took it quite for granted. What were mistresses for, indeed, but to sit at home in solitude whilst servants took their pleasures like my lady?

When the maids were gone and she had positively seen the last of them—her face pressed so tightly to the window-pane that the starched pattern of the intercepting curtain was imprinted on her forehead when she sat back upon her chair—strange feelings took possession of Miss Parkworth's soul. This house was once more her own; she its mistress; no servant stood between. The silence spoke to her; it communicated secrets; it imparted information that a mistress ought to know. A sense of regained possession, absolute and undisputed, filled her to the verge of triumph. An exultant voice broke forth in her: "At last!"

And yet, mixed with this triumphant mood were feelings of abandonment and desolation. In the sudden quietude that fell upon the maid's departure it was—for Miss Parkworth—as though the sombre

portals of the past were opened, and all the sad memories and emotions of a lifetime emerged. For seldom were they joyful memories; seldom joyful emotions; solitude is no begetter of such things. They were life's griefs and sorrows that poured out upon her in a solemn stream like the last long flood of ultra-golden sunlight escaping from the deep black bosom of the western sky. Right back from her childhood this flood of recollections poured, and over fifty years of life's disappointments, caught in it, cast prodigious shadows. On these evenings the dead came back to her. She stood by ancient sick-beds; her soul attended funerals; her heart wore crape. Such an atmosphere of melancholy crept into the house, such an utter sense of emptiness and desolation, that there were moments when she envied the dead. Yes. Their sorrowings and sickness over, she envied them the peace they had, the peace that this world could never give. She asked herself indeed, on many such occasions: "What is life to me?" Life offered her little except the memory of the past. She stood less kin (it was her bitter feeling) to the living than to the dead. Once upon a time she had had friends—real friends. Their friendship had spelt hope for her. At least, she had built her hopes in some respect upon their friendship, until death undeceived her, and one by one the props of faith and life and hope were all withdrawn. Once upon a time friends had come to keep her company and share her solitude on nights like these, or she had locked her door and gone to them. On such occasions the maid, returning, had been wont to call for her at this

house or the other, prearranged, and the two of them had made their way home together. In those days she had felt and owned a tempered dread of solitude. She had suffered the maid to open the house door a few yards in advance of her and make reconnaissance of the state of all within. Compulsion had not brought her into intimacy with solitude as now. People did not say then, as they said to-day, that she thought of nothing but the house, or hint (as sometimes now they did) that it was the fate of all women who remained single, and that she ought to have married long ago. Married? She? Nonsense! She was better as she was. She could never have put up with a husband's ways; at least, with some husbands' ways. They only brought a lot of dirt into the house, and caused it to smell perpetually of stale smoke, and left all the cushions soiled and crumpled just as they had sat down on them.

Those were the thoughts with which she dispelled the mood of melancholy and spurred herself to action. Come! Why make herself miserable? The maid was gone. She had the whole house to herself. Let her turn the key emphatically in the front door lock and see what state the kitchen had been left in. Would she find tea-leaves in the scullery sink? Crumbs on the cocoa-nut matting? Soap clogging the drain-trap? Dishcloths thrown down wringing wet? Oh, there were a hundred things that called on her from both upstairs and down. Married, indeed! The idea! A whole continent lay in front of her awaiting exploration. Who knows what she should discover, what suspicions awfully confirm!

VII

On the very second Wednesday, before she had been in the house a week—for of course it was unthinkable that any servant in her senses should have the effrontery to suggest going out on the Sunday following her arrival—the new maid tapped diffidently at Miss Parkworth's door. Oh, how Miss Parkworth detested the sound of such tapping ; so meek ; so apologetic ; so obsequious ; so plausible. Let knuckles knock as timorously as they would, the purpose still remained ; dissimulation only served to aggravate it. Why could they not be honest? Why could they not come to her door quite frankly and say, without deception, what they wanted?

" I suppose you'll have to go," she said, after putting the new maid through her catechism, and the girl's face betrayed an obvious relief—that Miss Parkworth blasted with the question : " Where are you going to? " For a moment a cloud of blank bewilderment descended on the girl's brow.

" I don't know'm," she said.

" Don't know ! " Miss Parkworth protested. " What? A young girl like you, fresh from the country, going out all alone on an evening in a strange town—and doesn't know where she's going to ! It's most improper I declare, I oughtn't to allow it."

" I've got a friend'm," the girl interposed in haste, as though she felt her night out threatened by the awful spectre of propriety. " *She'll* know'm."

" A friend ! " Miss Parkworth said suspiciously, plucking the word from the new maid's mouth as if there were no recommendation in it. For Miss

Parkworth held no opinion of friends in service. No opinion at all. They were a thoroughly demoralising influence. Maids were difficult enough to deal with, goodness knew, without any encouragement from friends. That was one of the chief reasons that prompted her to choose all her servants from the country. She would not engage maids out of her own town. No, she would not, where every errand served them as a pretext for running home, and they had no stint of acquaintances to gossip with at every street corner. It was impossible to curb a servant's tongue. Servants lived on falsehood and disseminated scandal as surely as flies fed on garbage and spread infection. Nothing in a house was sacred to them. They told everything they knew to one another, preposterously distorted, and each in turn communicated the tattle to her mistress, twisted out of every semblance of truth. Suspicion? Nay! This was no idle suspicion on Miss Parkworth's part. Experience supplied the proof of it. She had been told, in her own kitchen, the most intimate details concerning families well known to her by sight and name, which, but for the indisputable authority supporting them, would have overtaxed belief. Tales of discord in households whose domestic life was deemed above suspicion had been narrated to her with a fidelity compelling credence. She had been scandalised with the imprudences of married women; with the improprieties of husbands; with the dissipations of sons and the looseness of daughters. There was no limit to what servants would divulge. If other mistresses were too careless or too foolish to stop their maids from listening or

talking, that was not Miss Parkworth's way. She would not have the doings in her house retailed by servants for the curious to carp at. No, she would not have it. She had expressly forbidden it. She had warned them all: "If ever I hear of you talking about me to anybody behind my back, and telling people what goes on in my house, you will have to go. You understand?" Yes, they understood. All her servants understood. Not that their mistress trusted them the more for that. It was, at best, but a moral satisfaction—surely the poorest satisfaction of all. For nothing short of death, she knew, would seal a servant's mouth. And such a mouth as the new maid's mouth was no mouth for keeping counsel.

"Friend! What friend?" Miss Parkworth cried. "Where? Your mother told me distinctly you *had* no friends. It was on that strict understanding I consented to engage you. Who is the friend?"

"She's not exactly a friend'm," the maid corrected, with the strained look of one striving after the acceptable. "She's only a girl I know."

"First you say she's a friend, and now you tell me she's only a girl you know!" Miss Parkworth exclaimed, apostrophising the air about her. "Though what the difference is I declare I cannot understand." Little by little, however, she elicited the fact that the friend was a young woman in service with a family named Porter, resident in Gray Street.

"Gray Street—Gray Street——" Miss Parkworth reiterated with a puckered brow and a mouth drawn up like the gathered edges of a satchel. "Which *is* Gray Street? I never heard of the street before."

It was somewhere at the other end of the town, the maid explained. Miss Parkworth did not approve of the inference attaching to that phrase—" the other end of the town." She discouraged intimacy with the other end of the town. From the point of view of respectability the town had only one end; this was it. The less her servants knew about the other end the better.

" Is your mother aware of your acquaintance with this young woman ? " she asked severely, and the new maid raised her lashes in a flash of swift assurance.

" Oh, yes'm. It was her that went with me."

" Went with you ? When ? "

" The day we came to see you'm. The day you engaged me."

After that, what more could mistress-ship and wisdom do ? If the girl's mother were senseless enough to countenance acquaintances so undesirable, Miss Parkworth's lips were powerless. She could only nip them tighter as a preliminary to the declaration : " I am surprised at your mother, after what I said to her. Well, I suppose I must believe you."

" Remember ! " she charged the girl, " I expect you back again *punctually* at nine. Not a minute later. Nine is late enough for any girl to be out of doors. Do you hear ? " Yes, the new maid heard. The new maid seemed, indeed, to understand. Why, as her mother would have said : " She says yes'm. She says she does. She knows it's for her own good'm. Don't you ? Speak, then ! Aye, she says she does'm. She'll do her best to try and please you. I'm sure she will." Yet was that a glint beneath

the girl's long lashes—as of triumph for a purpose cunningly effected—when she breathed her modest "Thank you'm" and turned from Miss Parkworth's presence? Miss Parkworth felt convinced that she caught a look of something in the girl's eye. She suspected looks in girls' eyes; when she caught looks in girls' eyes experience taught her to be watchful. Yet before all things she was just. She never let herself judge hastily. She tried to think the best of every maid, even in the face of terrible suspicions that were only too frequently justified. And each new maid involved a new problem, a new trial, a new line of responsibilities.

What novels were to other mistresses maids were to Miss Parkworth. She perused them with the engrossing interest that other women paid to fiction. They were living volumes issued from the domestic circulating library, some clean and scarcely handled, others soiled and thumbed. Nor did she disguise from herself the fact that she bestowed far too much valuable time in their perusal. For, like pernicious fiction, they did not justify it. However promisingly they began in their first chapter, however artfully they held attention, the end was never once in doubt. The ends of novels and the ends of servants respectively admitted no variation; they were monotonously to a pattern. And as impatient readers of Miss Parkworth's sex are wont to set their insufferable pangs of curiosity at rest by reading the last chapter of each book before embarking on the first, so Miss Parkworth dipped into the character of each maid-servant in advance, that she might resign herself to its predestined

development. She knew. She knew beyond all doubt that just as tales of fiction ended in wedding-rings and folly, so the last chapter of every domestic story with a servant in it spelt disillusionment and bitterness of heart. Few maids ever took their leave of her but beneath a dark and stormy sky, in the suppressed atmosphere of thunder and latent lightning, and Miss Parkworth found all her limbs a-tremble when they were gone. For they took with them a part of her life. Something of her flesh and blood had been consumed in the manufacture of them. She had spent herself for their welfare in ungrudging labour. They took away with them ungratefully what gratitude alone could never repay. And when the house was free of them at last, she heaped reproaches on her head for the interest expended in such a thankless cause. She asked herself perplexedly: "Why do I trouble with them? Why do I wear myself to the bone to try and make them better than they are? I only work for others. At the very moment when they might repay me in some small degree for all I have done I am compelled to part with them. They force me to let them go." And for all the confidence paraded before her fellow-mistresses, for all the faith unflinchingly professed in her power to tame and manage maids, at heart she entertained more than a doubt of her ability to govern.

"I am too sentimental," she reproved herself, "too lenient; too considerate for their feelings. I let myself take far too keen an interest in their lives and doings. I forget they are servants; I treat them more like friends. Why should I do it? Why should I worry

myself thinking about people who never think of me? All the while they are away I keep perpetually thinking of them; wondering where they are, what they are doing, what is happening to them. Do they ever wonder about *me*? Not they. They put me out of their minds. They are only too glad to be rid of me. They never spare their mistress a thought that is not grudged."

It wounded her, it mortified her, to think she meant so little to her servants, who meant, despite her better reason, so much to her. Over and over again she had resolved in secret: "No! I will not sit and watch the girl go out. I am too greatly disgusted with her. I will not condescend to sit at the window and take the least interest in what hat she is wearing. I know too well, without the need to look. It is making too much of her. I am paying her a compliment she does not in the slightest sense deserve. Why should I think of others? Let me think of myself. It is time."

VIII

This new maid for instance. Not all Miss Parkworth's inarticulate distrust of her could quell a surreptitious interest. With the least encouragement, indeed, she could almost have indulged a dangerous liking for the girl. If only the girl's meek mouth and timid eyes and the shrinking softness of her voice had been, in truth, one-half of what they seemed, Miss Parkworth might have yielded to the temptation to take her underneath her wing, and openly disclose that warmth of feeling which her heart invariably

felt towards new servants until the inevitable moment when they basely betrayed it. Already Miss Parkworth experienced the pangs of protective zeal. Such a face as the new maid had deserved a better fate than to be stared at in the streets by bold-eyed men, or coarsened through contact with undesirable companions. With care and patience it might aspire to be the perfect servant's face. It might afford Miss Parkworth that peace, satisfy that high domestic ideal, for which, through all these thirty years and more of troubled housekeeping, her soul had sighed. "Surely to goodness," she had encouraged herself to hope, times out of number, "I shall find a servant *some* day in whom I can trust"—a servant, that is to say, who would be in all things, the reflection of her very self; who would think as her mistress thought, and do as her mistress said, and have no interests beyond her work, nor life outside the house; who would spare Miss Parkworth every anxiety, and dwell with her obediently to the end. Ah! It was a fine ideal, an ideal too fine, she feared in darker moments, ever to be realised. Even to encourage such a hope was to precipitate its ruin. Too often had she found it thus. To place the least confidence in a servant was the surest way to bring about betrayal. It was to pour the milk of human kindness into a leaking vessel. Only on a foundation of vigilant distrust was it possible to maintain the least security of relationship between a mistress and her maid. If faith were to be placed anywhere, let it be placed (for safety) in such eternal verities as human falsehood and deceptiveness, not in those perishable qualities like truth, goodness, loyalty, obedience, and

other figments of the fancy that withered in a day like flesh and grass, and starved the fatal confidence that fed upon them.

With each night out the hope glimmering in Miss Parkworth's bosom flickered to extinction, like the flame of a candle too feebly lit to sustain the rudeness of the draughts that blew upon it. Through the curtain she watched the maid depart, with such emotions as an angler has who sees himself forsaken by the solitary fish that for an afternoon has been the one hope of his trembling hook. This going had in it all the nature of deliberate rejection ; it was, in its essence, a flouting of better things. With the best of homes, the brightest of kitchens, the wisest and kindest of mistresses, the new maid could still hanker after the questionable attractions of the outer world. And this despite Miss Parkworth's earnest efforts to convert her to a higher plane of living ; to show her where alone true happiness was to be sought and found—to wit, at home. On the imprudence of nights out and the wretchedness too often born of them Miss Parkworth had expatiated to the new maid, and the new maid had hearkened with a face of awed subscription, as if the portals of her understanding had been opened wide to give admission to the wisdom of her mistress. Miss Parkworth's hope had drawn so much encouragement from the maid's demeanour that more than once she had said to herself : " Surely ! After such a talk with her she won't for very shame go out on Wednesday ! " But when Wednesday came, lo ! the muffled knock upon the door came with it, like the inexorable crack of doom :

"Please'm. It's me'm. I'm ready to go out now'm."

Oh! Miss Parkworth could have shaken her. She could have slapped her. She had scarce patience to vouchsafe reply. There were moments when her mouth was almost ready to retort: "Don't come troubling me now. I'm busy. Go away. I'll ring the bell when I'm at liberty." An inexpressible jealousy of the town crept up into her bosom. The town was her enemy, her deadly rival. This girl thought more about the town, with its dangerous street corners and disgraceful by-ways, than she did of her own mistress. Wisdom had been wasted on her; goodness in such a quarter was only thrown away. Yes! There she went with a foot that never faltered, with a head that never turned, with a circumspection in her gait that exasperated the eye that followed her. Where was she going to? What was the nature of this strong attraction that drew her like a magnet from the best of homes into the vicious turmoil of the streets? Why did she attire herself so carefully?

"I would give Something!" Miss Parkworth exclaimed with emphasis. "My word! I would give Something to know where the girl goes to! It would serve her right if I was to follow her one of these nights."

The suspicion that this new maid encouraged anything in the nature of a follower caused Miss Parkworth's incredulity to tremble. "It is impossible!" she said. "I cannot believe it. No, I will not believe it." For in the first place followers were forbidden—strictly, absolutely forbidden. The girl knew it; the girl's mother knew it. At the mere suggestion the girl had dropped her

eyes ; the mother had protested : " Followers ! Her! Why'm, she's nobbut a child. It'll be a long while yet before she'll need to trouble her head about *them* ! " " Certainly not so long as she wishes to remain in *my* service," Miss Parkworth emphasised. " It is one of the points on which I am determined." And the obliging mother had replied : " Why'm, even if she had such a thing as a young man—which I know very well she hasn't—she'd let him go sooner than lose a good place. She knows it's for her own good. She'll do anything to please you, I'm sure she will. Won't you ? Speak, then. Aye ! She says yes. She says she will'm."

Without going so definitely far as to infect the new maid's mind with images likely to suggest the very evil they were intended to proscribe, Miss Parkworth had probed the girl discreetly on a topic altogether repugnant to her own feelings. That she should be condemned, at her time of life, to search girls' minds for the surreptitious traces of followers was a detestable obligation, but mistresses who stood fast by their principles must shrink (she knew) from nothing. She had taken secret deep-sea soundings of her servant's character, to ascertain how far the girl was partial or antipathetic to the subject of young men in general. Had this friend of hers, for instance, a young man ? Not that she'd ever heard tell of'm, the girl replied. " Leastways, never when she's out with me'm." How did they spend their evenings together ? Where did they go to as a rule ? " Not flying about the streets, I hope ! " Miss Parkworth said severely " Oh, no'm ! " " Then if you don't do that what *do* you do ? "

she had demanded. " What else is there for maids to do when they go out ? " The question caused the new maid's mouth to fall, as if this consideration had not, till then, occurred to her. Sometimes (she said when her mind had recovered from its momentary loss of equilibrium) they didn't go out at all'm. Sometimes they sat in the kitchen together, while it was time for her come back. " What ! " exclaimed Miss Parkworth. " You mean to say you change into your best clothes in order to go and sit in someone else's kitchen ! As if your own kitchen wasn't good enough for you ! Do you call *that* a very sensible or proper thing to do ? "

This point of view, too, caused the girl's lip and lashes to subside, as if its cogency silenced her.

" Do you ? " Miss Parkworth repeated. " For if you do, *I* don't." And the girl subscribed a docile " No'm," although she added : " It's not what I always do'm. Only sometimes. Generally we go for a walk."

Concerning the direction of the walk she was vague. Neither she nor her friend (it seemed) had any partiality for busy streets. They avoided those. They preferred to go where it was lonely. Loneliness, on the other hand, offered no recommendation to Miss Parkworth. She strongly disapproved of two young girls going (particularly on an evening) where it was lonely. Indeed, it was not only undesirable but dangerous. One heard and read the most shocking accounts of lonely places. Loneliness was too often the resort and hunting-gound of evil-minded men. This particular phase of loneliness, however, was not the one which Miss Parkworth's maid had intended to suggest. The

sort of loneliness which she and her friend favoured was redeemed from danger (so she strove to reassure her mistress) by the presence of quite a lot of people. They were always within sound and sight of *some*body.

" You don't mean—the West Fields ! " Miss Parkworth protested, with a scandalised face. " No girls that value their characters at all would ever let themselves be seen near such a place at night." Pressed between the devil and the deep sea, the girl had said " Oh, no'm ! "

" If I thought that any servant of mine ever went there," Miss Parkworth declared, " I would not let her go out at all. No. No girl of any self-respect would run the risk of seeing the disgraceful things which (I am told) take place in the West Fields. As good as openly. I don't know what the police can be thinking of to allow it."

Thus beset at every end and turn on the subject of this night-out walk, its precise location grew still more vague. But on the subject of her friend's kitchen, as the result of close interrogation by Miss Parkworth, the girl was definite and clear. She had many interesting details to impart concerning the kitchen's size, the shade of its colour-wash, the character of its cooking range and gas stove. It afforded Miss Parkworth much secret gratification to be assured that in every respect of size, shape, colour, cleanliness, comfort, and convenience it fell short of her own. There was no rocking-chair with a cushion on it for the maid's use, nor was there a coloured cloth to spread upon the table in the evening, when work was

done. All these facts, and many more, bore eloquent testimony to the superiority of Miss Parkworth's home, and the provision made in it for the welfare and happiness of her servants. She could only feel surprise that the new maid was ever willing to exchange so good a kitchen of her own for one (by all accounts) so bad. Repeatedly she told the new maid: "I cannot understand it. It seems very strange to me." Nor could she understand how it came to pass that any servant should be free to entertain her friends in the kitchen. Was the girl's mistress aware of it? She was! Miss Parkworth made many discreet enquiries respecting the character of this mistress, and took means to let her personal opinion be known without actually expressing it. How many were there in family? Just the mistress and her husband? No daughters? No sons? She laid a deeper stress upon the latter, and paused appreciably for her maid's reply, which came (as she expected) in the negative.

IX

And yet——

And yet suspicions must be sent by providence (Miss Parkworth held) for some wise purpose, or why did we have them? To tread them underfoot, after the fashion of certain people—as things unworthy to be entertained—was surely the very height of folly. How often had she heard some disillusioned fellow-mistress say: "Of course I had had my suspicions for a long time, but still, I refused to listen to them. I had such trust in the girl."

Suspicions, in Miss Parkworth's estimation, were suspicions; they could not be got rid of, try how one would; they could only—at one's peril—be ignored, like locks and bolts and window-catches. Suspicions were the natural policemen of the mind, established there by Higher Hands to protect innocence from fraud, and goodness from imposture. In Miss Parkworth's judgment the pity was there were not more of them. For, many though they might be, they were yet not numerous enough to guard the confidence of human nature against assault. Faith was being for ever robbed, even when (for safety), as a last resource, we placed it in ourselves.

Mistresses who could not be bothered to suspect anything or anybody on the score that it was useless labour to go out to meet a trouble quite capable of finding its own way deserved to be deceived.

"If I am to be deceived at all," Miss Parkworth decided, with notable strength of character, "it shall be with my own knowledge and consent. I will not be made a fool of. No, not to please anybody."

In pursuance of which wise policy she posted a suspicion at every vulnerable point where confidence stood in the least fear of being abused. No mistress could know too much about the servants in her employment. And nights out afforded the surest index of a girl's character. After these hours of unbridled liberty, spent too often in questionable quarters and in the company of promiscuous acquaintances, maids were apt to bring some tell-tale traces back with them. Such nights of freedom tended to relax their moral fibres; their powers of dissimulation were enfeebled;

they returned at times in a spirit of carelessness bordering on defiance. Nor were they always able to reassume their discarded character so promptly as their cap and apron. The moment of a maid's return was a fruitful moment for the wisdom of a mistress prompt enough to take advantage of it. For which reason Miss Parkworth deprecated the practice followed by a certain school of mistresses who unlocked the door to facilitate the maid's admission towards the statutory hour of her return, with the remark: "She'll be home very shortly now. It's about her time."

"*About* her time!" Such an utterance in itself was sufficient to condemn a mistress out of her own mouth. There was no place for the word "about" in wisely ordered service. Time was time. And to unlock a door in advance of it was to connive at deception. It permitted crafty maids to steal into a house unnoticed, long after their appointed hour, and to retort unblushingly, when ultimately sought and challenged: "I've been back a long while now'm. Didn't you hear me come in? I've been back ever since a few minutes before nine."

Nor did Miss Parkworth unlock the door and permit the maid to slide past her like a disquiet phantom, with the vaguest interchange of murmurs between them. No. This, if any, was the moment for clear voices and keen looks. She invariably followed her servants into the kitchen; turned up the kitchen gas—if such were the season—that her thoughtful care had lit already; and held them in the iron grip of interrogatories, pierced by the sharpest eye.

"You look very hot. Have you been running?"

For Miss Parkworth did not approve of maids who were driven to the length of running in order to reach their home betimes. Running was a bad sign in servants. She had seen too much of it. If three hours was not time enough for a respectable servant to go out and come back in, without recourse to running, there could be only one possible explanation. How did Miss Parkworth know? She knew—she knew.

And then, before the maid had time to doff her outgoing things, Miss Parkworth subjected them and her to ruthless scrutiny. From head to foot her keen gaze travelled like a searchlight, as she stood with folded hands and a firm, judicial mouth.

"Your hair looks very untidy. Very untidy. What is the cause of it? The wind? Nonsense. There isn't any wind."

Or it was their footwear that drew her comment. "Good gracious! What a state your shoes are in! Is that clay? Wherever in the world have you been? Get them off at once. You're scarcely fit to come into the house."

Or it was the hem of their skirt that drew from her eye an intolerable beam, exposing dust, or straw, or the dampness of dew.

"Have you been walking on wet grass? You must have been."

On their eyes in particular Miss Parkworth's gaze rested without mercy, for eyes (she knew) were peculiarly susceptible to the influence of other eyes

that had much to ask and nothing to conceal. She suspected over-brilliant or languid eyes that turned away from hers as though through weakness from a strong light; eyes that stared out of white, blank faces, or gleamed unnaturally above flushed cheek-bones, or swam in a sea of introspection as if they occupied some other world, and gazed incomprehendingly at a mistress and a kitchen strange to them. Oh, her knowledge of the domesticated human eye was almost supernatural. Even married ladies marvelled at the things she knew, the secret things that eyes imparted to her. At times they said with admiration and amazement:

"Really, Miss Parkworth, you do surprise Us! However did you come to know such things?"

And she flushed, in part responsive to the greatness of the compliment; in part by reason of the delicacy of her own position; in part because she felt indignant with the blind stupidity of married women. When a woman was once married, it appeared to Miss Parkworth that all her powers of observation went. She seemed to be left with nothing more to look for. The signs and portents of her own sex were thrown away on eyes devoid of the least incentive to see. Cases had actually occurred in Miss Parkworth's experience where shocking events had taken place in a house, right under the eyes of the girl's mistress, and the mistress had suspected nothing. Nothing. Neither before nor after. It was incredible. As Miss Parkworth said when the dread story was recounted to her: "My goodness! Wherever were your eyes? Couldn't you tell the difference?" To which the

married mistress had been only able to reply, perplexed, "Why, I thought——"

Thought! Miss Parkworth had no patience with such thinking. It was the excuse invariably put forth by indolent or thoughtless servants—creatures too lazy to think at all—when charged with some act of incredible stupidity. "Why, I thought'm——" Thought! Miss Parkworth did not think. She knew. She knew.

X

Yes. Spinsterhood had served at least to make her powers of observation acute. She had not sat behind the starched propriety of her window-curtains during thirty years of maids' nights out for nothing. Solitude is a great sharpener of the faculties; through loneliness they learn what company can never teach. And Sunday evenings in particular (for those with leisure and the will to take advantage of them) are great instructors in those subjects on which all mistresses should seek to be informed. There was something in the peaceful Sabbath air that seemed peculiarly favourable to contemplation, to the deep study of one's kind. The evening light might fail and turn to dusk—or deeper—but she never lit her gas. She sat incorporated in the deepening gloom, and no more distinguishable from it than was the pattern distinguishable from the shroudlike curtain through which so steadfastly she peered. To the outer world this was a room of silence and of shade, untenanted. If the season called for fires, and the

fire behind her broke thoughtlessly into an unbecoming blaze, she quelled it with promptitude and drew a screen between its brightness and her seated form. Not, to be sure, that such scrupulous regard for the feelings of those she looked at was necessary. Their own indifference to the possibility of observation laid them open to nothing but scorn. Misled by the pervasive atmosphere of quiet and respectability they paid as little heed to the houses on each side of them as if these had been tombstones commemorating the dead. Even as she sat absorbed in the objects of her study Miss Parkworth's contempt for their imprudence and stupidity rose to such a pitch as her lips could not contain.

"Have they forgotten," she exclaimed, all her sense of propriety affronted, "that they are in the open street? If they pay so little respect to decency with windows on all sides of them, what in the name of goodness will they do in the West Fields? It is terrible to think of."

As soon as the church bells languished and died down on Sunday evening, and the last of the belated worshippers from her own neighbourhood had hurried from the street, fastening their gloves and adjusting their flounces as they went, a new current—flowing from the opposite direction—crept into it. It was a sinister, a questionable current. It showed no appreciation of the sacredness of the day. The source of motion impelling it was its own pleasure, untempered by the least consideration of duty or restraint. By ones and twos they came; night-outers of every sort; some so respectable in appearance as

to shock Miss Parkworth with the impropriety of the company they kept ; shopgirls flaunting their seventh-day finery ; domestic servants grotesquely over-dressed, whose noisy conduct was outrageously at variance with the pretentiousness of what they wore ; feminine imprudence of every age from youth to maturity, preceded, or pursued, or openly accompanied by males of such patent undesirability as caused Miss Parkworth's heart to burn ; all moving by a process as irresistible as the circulation of the blood towards the West Fields, where, beyond the last lorn lamp-post, supervision ceased and sex was left with no control but its own impulses and the evil counsel of the dark. Oh ! Miss Parkworth's feelings—harrowed by over thirty years of helpless watching from her window—never failed to burst into a flame of indignation at the sight. What were the authorities thinking of ? What were these young girls' mothers doing to allow it ? The older delinquents were altogether past the reach of sympathy or counsel. If by now they had not learned their awful lesson it seemed as though experience could teach them nothing. But these younger girls—mere children, some of them, plucking at this tender age the fruit that many women never in their lifetime tasted—could nothing be done to stop their wild pursuit of pleasure ? Were the police quite powerless ? Could no means be devised to close the West Fields to all promiscuous company by night, and so obliterate the awful stain that lay upon the town ?

Here, whilst she sat behind her window, restrained by every bond of moral obligation, self-pride, religious

feeling, and respectability, these young people of the inferior classes were privileged to roam the streets without the least impediment or penalty. They paced beneath lamp-posts in wait for one another; they kept clandestine appointments beneath her very windows. The sights she had seen, the conversations she had overheard, with her nose-end within three feet of the speakers; the embraces she had seen administered and taken, under the fatuous belief that the street was blind, or out of contempt for witnesses so superior as to lose every effective influence over shame—of these things, in this place, it is impossible to speak. She herself did no more than skim the cream of wisdom from the milk-bowl of experience. She never amplified her source of information. It was sufficient that she knew. She knew.

Though, as she told even the closest of her friends, "I could not bring myself to tell you All."

XI

With such experience of the world and the ways of both sexes, and such instances of the weakness of humanity brought nightly to her notice, it is not surprising that Miss Parkworth refused to place confidence in any single member of it so long as that confidence was continually shaken by so many. Servant-girls were servant-girls the whole world over; the only points of difference between them consisted in their individual powers to deceive. And the fact that the new maid conformed externally to all the obligations imposed upon her in no wise lessened

Miss Parkworth's doubts or vigilance. Rather, indeed, it tended to increase them. She had a deepening intuition of being deceived. "The girl is very close," Miss Parkworth decided. "There is something she is keeping from me. There must be. I am sure of it."

And this conviction caused her to maintain such watch from behind the front-room window as she had not done for more than a twelvemonth. Not, indeed, since she had set herself to watch the new maid's predecessor but one, and had been rewarded by discovering—— But she would not dwell upon a topic so repugnant to her feelings. It had cost her much pain and horror, and even sacrifice of health, entailing (as it did) long vigils by the staircase window at a time when (already) she had been feeling far from well. Yet servants paid no heed to the health or comfort of a mistress. They seemed insensible to everything except their own selfish pleasures.

"A mistress," Miss Parkworth came very near to accepting as her dictum, "ought to have no conscience if she values her own comfort."

The cry was born of momentary bitterness of heart, and her conscience never subscribed to it. On the contrary, she addressed herself to the new maid's welfare with a new determination. The new maid's youth, despite all the faults and blemishes contained in it, appealed irresistibly to Miss Parkworth's womanhood. The meek mouth, the shrinking humidity of the blue eyes, the timid accents of the new maid's voice, seemed to supplicate protection. They spoke aloud to Miss Parkworth's feelings imploring them to save a weak and errant creature from herself.

"After all," Miss Parkworth reflected, "I am responsible for her. So long as she remains beneath my roof she is under my charge. I cannot stand idly by and do Nothing."

And she watched the new maid go forth into the great Unknown, two nights each week, with a real pain at heart. For, of a truth, the new maid displayed a trim, attractive figure to the world. Even Miss Parkworth acknowledged that the girl presented a most respectable appearance in the street. She was neat; she walked without loitering, yet her step was staid enough to dispel the least suspicion of frivolity; and her hat—since she had removed the offending feather from it at Miss Parkworth's instigation—met every requirement of propriety and prudence. Albeit Miss Parkworth knew too well the peril of commending maids for what they wore, to herself she could not dissimulate a feeling of gratification at the girl's appearance. No servant in all the street; no servant in the employment of any of Miss Parkworth's few remaining friends, did greater public credit to the influence of her mistress. It would be a thousand pities, indeed, for such promising respectability to come to harm. Nothing in the girl's demeanour or attire attracted notice; her appearance was admirably neutral. And yet (Miss Parkworth was most painfully aware) between her going forth from the house and her coming back to it she would have to run the gauntlet of innumerable eyes; eyes that paid not the least regard to the saving signs of modesty, but sought—below that—for ignobler, baser things. Oh! these nights out were a mistake. They were a dreadful mistake.

Whoever had been in the first place responsible for them! They had much, very much, terribly much to answer for.

For the trouble was that Miss Parkworth's growing interest in the new maid elicited no visible response on the girl's part. She seemed unaware of the absorbing interest her mistress took in her, and of the anxieties and perplexities suffered on her behalf. No demonstration of goodwill seemed to break down the girl's barrier of timidity and silence. She came and went and moved about the house in her own tenuous atmosphere, speaking when spoken to, yet volunteering nothing; a shadow imbued with the cryptic silence of a Sphynx.

"I declare!" Miss Parkworth was provoked at times to say, "you tell me nothing. I have to ask for every single thing. I get tired of asking. You might not possess a tongue of your own. You don't seem to want me to take any interest in you."

But such remonstrance effected nothing in the new maid's confidability. She said "Yes'm" and "No'm," and was, for the rest, as communicative as a November fog.

Nor were her comings home more informative than her goings forth. Invariably she returned by the same way that she went. Somewhere in the vicinity of nine o'clock Miss Parkworth's eye descried the looked-for figure down the street, and a curious feeling—akin to the vexation of disappointment—possessed the watcher as this figure detached itself from the long perspective of bay windows and from every contact with contiguous forms that (for one brief moment) presented the illusion of companions, and advanced

with the familiar, unloitering step, as though no backward inclinations checked it. Strictly punctual at all times the girl was not. Miss Parkworth had occasion more than once to face her at the door with an aspect of severity.

"Where in the name of fortune have you been?" —a query never answered to her satisfaction. "If you can't come home more punctually than this I won't let you go out at all. I won't allow my servants to be in the streets after nine o'clock. It isn't right. Goodness knows what may happen."

Yet three months passed and nothing happened more than this. The new maid went and the new maid came, twice weekly, wet or fine, and Miss Parkworth's baffled interest deepened. Deepened dreadfully. After some long evening of suspense the uncommunicative presence of the returned maid proved almost unbearable.

"Well, have you *nothing* to say?" she asked at times when, with folded hands and tightened lips, she followed the silent figure through the passage and scanned its vague, evasive movements in the kitchen.

"Me'm?" was all the new maid ever said, in tones of mild bewilderment. "No'm."

"Don't answer me with your back turned," Miss Parkworth was goaded to protest, for the new maid's eyes perpetually eluded her. "Look towards me when I speak. You should not need to be told such things by this time. Surely you have been here long enough."

"Yes'm," said the girl meekly, offering her mistress a penitential face. But the eyelids remained lowered, and the lashes lay upon her cheek.

" You never look me in the face," Miss Parkworth commented. " Never. You always drop your eyes when you speak to me. I don't like people who do that. It looks as if they had something they were concealing from me. Something they were ashamed of, and were frightened I might find out. Have you ? "

At that the new maid flushed up to the roots of her hair. For a moment her self-possession seemed almost to desert her.

" Me'm ? " she breathed, with faint demur. " Oh, no'm."

" Well," Miss Parkworth decided after a dubitative pause, " you ought to get rid of the habit. It is a very bad habit. No ! I don't want you to stare at me," she added, for the new maid was making a desperate attempt to return her mistress's regard, although with indifferent success. " I do not like girls of so little spirit," Miss Parkworth decided then, " that agree with everything, and tell you nothing. If a girl won't speak at all—what can a mistress do ? She is powerless."

The new maid had come to Miss Parkworth during the second week of July. By the end of September she knew no more about the girl than her own suspicions told her. More than once she confessed to herself : " The girl utterly bewilders me. I do not know *what* to make of her. I declare ! I'm almost beginning to think it will be a relief when she goes."

And then, all at once, with dramatic suddenness, Miss Parkworth's long-tried patience was rewarded ; her suspicions were justified ; this glassy current of deceptive seeming was abruptly broken.

XII

To be sure, an instrument of observation so sensitive as Miss Parkworth's eye had not failed to register, of late, a subtle but decided change in the new maid's conduct, which prepared her mistress for what ensued. For instance, Miss Parkworth had noted an unmistakable tendency on the girl's part to encroach upon the official period of her night-out leave. Slight though the tendency was, the fact remained that it was there. Miss Parkworth disliked such tendencies. She disliked *any* tendencies on the part of her servants. Every abuse began by being a tendency. She was constrained to ask the new maid for an explanation. "How is it," she enquired, "that you come back later and later? You never by any chance come back *before* your time. Once you used to be on the doorstep regularly as the clock was striking. Then you appeared to think yourself punctual enough if it struck when you were in the street. Now you let it strike when you are goodness knows how far away. For the last three times it has struck minutes before there was the least vestige of you. I have remonstrated, but all to no purpose. What is the meaning of this?" There was no meaning, it seemed, except that the new maid was "Sorry'm."

"Sorry'm?" Miss Parkworth ejaculated. "I should think you *are* sorry! You ought to be sorry. Coming back in this way. And then, when you do come, you land home all hot and out of breath as if you had been running. Have you been running? You haven't? No! But it looks to me very much as if you had. You must have been. You're scarcely

fit to come into the room and lay the supper things. No self-respecting girl ought to be running about the streets at this time of night. What time did you leave your friend?" To be sure, Miss Parkworth shot the question without warning, like an arrow from a bow, but that was not sufficient reason for the new maid's startled look and dazed enquiry: "Which friend'm?"

"*Which* friend? Why, goodness me! How many have you got? I understood there was only one—the one I have allowed you to have. Isn't there? Or have you been deceiving me?"

"Oh, *her*'m," the new maid said. No. There was only that one'm. She'd left her a few minutes before nine.

"Where?" demanded Miss Parkworth, and again (it seemed to her) the new maid's face exhibited a look of something like alarm.

"At her home'm. Where she lives. Caswell Street."

"*Caswell* Street! She doesn't live in Caswell Street. She lives in Gray Street."

In a low voice the maid demurred. "No'm, Caswell Street."

"But you said Gray Street to me!" Miss Parkworth persisted. "I'm sure you did. You must have done. I remember quite distinctly. Where else have I got the name from?"

"She used to live in Gray Street," the new maid acknowledged meekly. "But she's been left there some time."

"Some time!" Miss Parkworth exclaimed. "What

do you call ' some time ' ? " The new maid's definition of " some time " was three weeks.

" And you never thought to tell me this before ? " Miss Parkworth charged her. " All this while you've left me to imagine you were calling for your friend in Gray Street, and you've not so much as breathed a word. And you wouldn't even have told me now if I hadn't directly asked you. Why did she leave ? " The new maid did not rightly know. She rather thought that " her and the missus had had words'm." Oh, this furnished a new light on the character of the new maid. Her disposition had the depth of a well—though Miss Parkworth doubted whether one drop of truth lay at the bottom of it. Such a girl would disclose nothing that was not forcibly drawn out of her by means of windlass and bucket.

" I am thoroughly disappointed in you," she declared. " What confidence can you expect me to repose in you after this ? Since this girl's mistress has dismissed her, she may have very good grounds for doing so. In any case I ought to know what they are. Such a young woman may be no fit companion for a maid of mine. I shall have to think it seriously over."

She thought it seriously over, and came to the conclusion that it would be necessary to put the new maid through a close enquiry before giving sanction to her next night's leave. With which intent she took her place before the front-room window and assumed a judicial posture in readiness for the timid, irritating knock. She had her line of policy prepared. She would begin by expressing doubt as to the

desirability of letting the new maid go out at all. She would speak of this, she would speak of that, whilst time sped, and the new maid languished in her outgoing things, and judgment trembled in the balance. Finally, on the security of many promises and pledges, resolution should seem to waver. She would relent; she would give the new maid one more opportunity to show appreciation of all the benefits lavished on her.

But no knock yielded the desired signal. Six o'clock struck; the minutes passed; she felt all her accumulated advantage slipping perilously through her fingers like sand. Until the maid knocked at the door she was helpless. Her only part consisted in the assumption of a sovereign detachment; here in awful silence she must sit, remote as a deity; a hidden source of terror to all hesitating suppliants. Perhaps, after what had happened, the girl lacked courage to approach the high sanctuary of mistress-ship. There was sustaining satisfaction in the thought, but already Miss Parkworth had been defrauded of the first fruits of dissimulated eagerness. With every second her policy lost virtue, as if it had been a hot joint left to cool upon a sideboard. Twenty minutes past six! This delay was unpardonable! What in the world could the girl be thinking of? Exasperation rose to such a pitch within her as to sweep all policy aside. She rose to her feet; swept to the door; opened it; thrust a sharpened profile through the vent:

"Mary!"

"Yes'm." The answer, meekly given, came (she could, but for her spinsterhood, be sworn) from the kitchen. Yet Miss Parkworth had aimed her voice

and hearing up the staircase to the top landing where the suspected bedroom was. Downstairs, at *this* time!

"Where are you?"

"I'm here'm."

"Where's here?"

"In the kitchen'm."

"In the kitchen!" Miss Parkworth crossed sharply to the kitchen door and stood within its framework, a figure of compulsion and enquiry. "What are you stopping here for? How much longer do you expect me to sit waiting of you? You know this is supposed to be your night out. If you can't be ready at the proper time, after all our hurry to get done just in order to suit you, you'd better not have a night out at all. I'd a very good mind not to let you go. Yes, a very good mind not to let you go——"

"Please'm, I'm not going," retorted the maid's meek voice.

"Not going!" exclaimed Miss Parkworth, the last remnant of her power torn from the hand that held it. "Well, of all the—— After me sat waiting of you since before six, and never the grace to let me know. Why? Why aren't you going, pray?"

The maid replied in a voice still meeker:

"Please'm, I don't want to go."

"Don't *want* to go!" Miss Parkworth remonstrated, as though such arbitrary preference on her servant's part disgusted her. "Have you no better answer than that to give me? Are yours the only wants to satisfy? Have *I* no wants to be consulted?"

"I'd rather stop at home'm," the maid returned, "I'm tired of going out. I'd sooner sit i' kitchen."

A few days since—a week ago, such an intimation of her maid's extraordinary desire to stay at home might have offered gratifying food for hope. Miss Parkworth might have felt the flattery of such a choice, to think that, at last, this kitchen—long despised—had come into its own ; was being preferred to the outer world and all the latter's questionable liberties. She might have placed something of the maid's decision to the credit of her own wise influence, and said : " Thank goodness my words have had some weight with her at last ! It is a beginning. Who knows ! In the end I may make something of her, after all." But her faith, too sorely tried, could now no longer rise above the level of misgiving.

" What makes you so anxious to sit in this kitchen, all of a sudden ? " she asked. " There must be a reason for it. You have had plenty of opportunities to stay at home before, goodness knows. Your going out was never any wish of *mine*."

The new maid said " No'm " in a tone so meek as almost to convey the sense of gratitude. " I don't feel very well'm " she vouchsafed at last. " I've got a headache'm."

Miss Parkworth resented the necessity to take the rancour out of her voice. Twice this night had rightful wrath been stolen from her. But she met the altered circumstances as a Christian should, although her sympathies were sharpened to a razor-edge. " Why didn't you tell me so at once ? When did this headache come on ? "

It had come on, so the maid informed her, " a bit since." She'd been troubled with it a day or two'm.

"And I'm not at all surprised," Miss Parkworth's comment was. "The length of time you were out last Wednesday, and the way you must have hurried home."

She commended the maid to quietude by the kitchen fire, and herself returned to the sitting-room, where for a while—impelled by custom—she resumed her seat behind the curtain and sat in a spirit of austere and vindicated wisdom. But not for long. The outer world had lost all savour of significance. She peered no more at human shapes of poignant indistinctness; at distant figures of such strange familiarity as made suspicions leap. Speculation to-night had lost all zest; the world beyond her window was bereft of every thrill of possibility. For the new maid sat on the cane-bottomed rocking-chair before the fire in Miss Parkworth's kitchen, and Miss Parkworth's brooding interests were there. She watched the street with eyes wrought only now and then to keener vision. From time to time her lips let forth the ejaculations made mechanical by thirty years of usage. But her heart was in the kitchen, and periodically her flesh and blood rejoined it. Sickness is a great magnet. And besides, it is a potent loosener of tongues. In sickness the human soul needs sympathy, which it is not unwilling to purchase by confidence. Miss Parkworth's sympathies fluttered anxiously about the new maid like a moth about a candle, or—to choose a harsher simile—like carrion over fallen stock. "What!" her solicitude exclaimed for the maid sat in a kitchen unrelieved from gloom by anything but the fitful flicker of its fire, "Why

good gracious, you're all in the dark. I can't see you. I'm sure it's not good to be sitting like this. Light the gas at once."

Obedient to her mistress's command the maid rose from her chair and lit the solitary burner above the kitchen table. The staring flame intensified the whiteness of her face and deepened the shadows cast by her long lashes. The pupils of her eyes, adjusted to the recent darkness of the kitchen, were so much dilated as to bear a look of blindness. She dropped her lids over their large humidity and turned her gaze aside from the flaring gas which her fingers regulated. Miss Parkworth's eyes, in turn, were incommoded by the sudden flash of light thrown on to them, and she had to draw their edges together; but even thus mitigated her gaze vied with the gas itself for intensity.

"I can't understand this headache of yours," she told the maid. "When do you say it began? No. Don't turn away when I speak. Stand there. Let me look at you. You seem very pale."

The girl stood as directed, a flinching figure of self-consciousness, and Miss Parkworth's eyes devoured her.

"Are you in the habit of having headaches?" she enquired. "Your mother certainly said nothing about headaches when I engaged you." She plied the sufferer with questions, taking ever a firmer grip of the passivity sensed beneath this tissue of sickness. She said decisively: "When a servant is unwell in my house I naturally feel responsible. Have you told me everything I ought to know? Is there anything else I should be told?"

The girl said " No'm," but she said " No'm " in a weakened voice. Miss Parkworth felt assured it was a weakened voice ; it was a voice at the extremity of dissimulation ; the girl's powers of resistance were failing her ; beyond her weakness lay an illimitable field for exploration where who knows what discoveries might be obtained. Miss Parkworth dug spurs into persistency. " No ? " she echoed. " You say ' No,' but it sounds very much to me as if you meant ' Yes.' Is that what you mean ? Surely you don't suppose I'm troubling to ask you all these questions for any pleasure to myself ? It's your own good I'm thinking of. I'm your mistress. If there's anything you have to tell anybody, I ought to be the first person to turn to. How can I help you unless you do ? Come, what's all this headache about ? Is it anything you know, and won't tell ? "

Again the girl said " No'm " in a voice so trembling low as to be almost inaudible. And the next moment, before Miss Parkworth could interpolate another word, she had thrown up her two hands before her face and burst into tears.

XIII

It needed but those tears to liberate every suspicion in Miss Parkworth's nature ; they burst forth and flooded her intelligence with a dreadful stream of light in which the worst surmises stood confirmed, just as the staring gas had but a little while ago redeemed the kitchen from its gloom. Tears ! Her soul trembled

on the brink of disclosures, between fear and tumultuous elation, as though it stood at the threshold of the terrific majesty of its maker. In this tense moment all her recent sympathies dissolved and slid away. Only the sharpness of triumphant certitude remained, cleaving every other sentiment like a sword. "I knew it!" The sacrifice of a fellow-creature is a small price to pay for the joy of a suspicion justified. Miss Parkworth had sacrificed victims nearer and dearer to her than this weeping servant-maid. And servant-maids were intended to be sacrificed. They formed suspicion's proper food.

"Come!" she said. "It's no use crying about it, whatever it is. Tears do no good at all. Tell me what's the matter with you." She spoke with the directitude that wastes no sympathy, but is not, withal, unkindly. She carved her sentences with precision, as if they had been slices of cold meat cut from the joint by some experienced carver, and dealt without regard to individual feelings. Cold they were, these strips of verbal wisdom, but they bore a certain comfort with them. After all, they were a food, however tersely cut and served; they were meat for sorrow to partake of. And besides, too much compassion tempted tears to flow; something of a more astringent quality was required to stanch them. For tears, Miss Parkworth knew, were not communicative. And behind tears, or beneath them, or wherever it might be, brains were sometimes busy. No quarter must be given to tears; they were fluid things devoid of character, changing their course and purpose even as they ran.

"Come!" Miss Parkworth commanded. "You will

have to tell me now. I shall take no denial. I am your mistress. I am responsible in a way for all that happens to you. *Some*thing has happened to you. What is it?"

The girl, with her hands still held before her eyes, had drooped slowly in the direction of the rocking-chair and subsided on it. The reciprocation of its rockers suggested movement to her as an alleviation of distress, and as she sat she rocked disconsolately, lost now to all sense of the respect due to a standing mistress. The tears, and their accompaniment of forlorn rocking—that gave no promise of finality—aggravated Miss Parkworth beyond endurance.

"For goodness' sake stop rocking," she exclaimed, "when I am speaking to you. Do you want to make me sick?" The rocking ceased immediately, but not the tears. "And stop crying!" Miss Parkworth added, encouraged by the success of her first imperative. "Do you hear? Put your hands down."

The hands went down, obediently, in turn. But the tears, as though feeling their publicity and helplessness the more, flowed faster. And out of the smeared wet lips that turned aside from the unimpeded weight of the gaze laid on them burst forth the suffocated exclamation: "Oh, missus! I wish I'd never come to service. I wish I'd stopped at home. I wish I was dead."

"*What!*" Miss Parkworth cried, herself stirred to the marrow by this dramatic intensity of utterance. "*What* do I hear you say? Wish you were dead! At *your* age! Never let me hear you wish such a wish again. It is a shocking wish for a young girl—in so

good a situation as you are in. Only bad women, and girls with very much to be ashamed of, would ever utter such a wish." Until that moment—for all she knew, she knew—she had not dared to put a definition to the thing known ; she had only privileged herself to allow suspicion every latitude. But all at once her comprehension caught fire ; it burned up like a tar-brand, disseminating lurid light and smoke. She beat aside the reek of incredulity that choked her. " You don't mean," she said, advancing to the figure on the chair, " that you—that you have positively allowed something disgraceful to happen to you ! Whilst you are in my service ! Is that what all this crying means ? " Conviction grew upon her as she gazed. The figure in the chair, though it spoke no word with its lips, seemed to shape its whole self to a posture of confessive shame. No sound, no sign of hot repudiation came from it. " Do you hear what I say ? " Miss Parkworth ruthlessly insisted. " Have you actually gone and brought shame upon yourself, and upon this house ? Have you ? Is that what you mean ? Is it ? Is it ? " In her awful indignation, incensed by the girl's silence, she strode across the kitchen and let her outraged righteousness blaze over the huddled figure on the chair. Almost she could have taken the girl by the two shoulders and shaken her. Instead, she seized one inert arm and shook it peremptorily, flinging it back into the girl's lap with a gesture of repugnance and disgust. Aye ! It was true ! It was true enough. By any humiliation short of words the stricken creature was prepared to disclose her dreadful secret. Miss Parkworth's eyes rifled the

defenceless face of all its shameful and unguarded store ; they roved without mercy from the long, wet lashes to the gleaming cheeks ; to the weak, dropped underlip, sucked inward at every alternate breath over the convulsion of a sob ; the rounded, dabbled chin ; the small ear with its burning, shame-red lobe ; the smooth forehead pencilled with its two absurdly delicate and graceful brows. It was the face of a child. The look of troubled innocence upon it shocked her, outraged her sense of decency. Such awful wickedness in one so young ! " My goodness ! " she said, articulating every syllable. " My goodness ! " And she withdrew from this proximity so shameful to her original standplace in the kitchen. For awhile she said no other word. She stood with tightened mouth and folded hands, making silence her stronghold, filled with such revulsion of disgust as her lips could find no means to utter. Her external feelings were as concrete ; all her outward self seemed rigid and implacable ; a frontage of censure, of horror, of detestation. This shocking thing had happened to a maid of *hers* ; in her own house ; under her very nose. Oh ! the monstrous deception that had been practised on her. It was unpardonable. No mercy could, or should, be shown it.

That was her outward attitude, the attitude her indignation chose to wear, that her hands and head and hardened mouth expressed. But within her, as she stood, there rose a fierce tide of exultation, of triumph, of vindicated righteousness, permeating all the fabric of her anger. It was like the savour of hot viands, of soups and meats and sauces, that takes

possession of a house and makes it seem less an abode of bricks and mortar than a habitation built of odours. Such odours as nothing in the cook's art can subdue ; such exultation, such triumph, such revengeful righteousness as nothing in Miss Parkworth's bosom could suppress. It had happened at last—this thing she had been so long waiting for ! It had happened as it was inevitable that it should happen ; as she had foreseen that it must happen. Her cup of wisdom trembled to the brim ; scarce could she steady it against the imminence of overspilling. She looked upon the girl's young face with hatred, loathing the detestable youth in it. This trouble was as a banquet for rectitude to feed on ; these tears were wine ; these sobs were dishes rich and rare. She tasted an exquisite joy in the creature's downfall. A voice of wrath and righteousness run riot boomed like a bell within her, reiterating : " Yes ! Weep ! Sob ! Pull what faces you please ! Cry your heart out ! Sobs and faces will not help you now. It serves you right. You wouldn't stop at home, for all I warned you. You wouldn't forgo your nights out for anything I said. You thought more about the streets and your own enjoyment than you did of me. What did you expect ? I knew what would happen to you."

Yes. Here was reward at last for all Miss Parkworth's anxious hours ; for all her dark forebodings ; for all her dreary life of solitude and deprivation. Night by night, whilst she remained at home behind her curtains, as respectability should do, denying herself everything that life could offer, these girls, without a thought of duty or consequence, were flinging

themselves headlong into every excitement, every danger, every sort of wicked pleasure. There was nothing they did not know, save prudence; nothing they did not do, except their duty; no depth of sinfulness they did not plumb between their taking leave of a mistress and returning to her. Yes. Girls. Mere girls in their very teens, who had only just left school to take up service. Bits of girls no more than a third of Miss Parkworth's age, who posed for her deception as children, and knew as much as married women. Did these girls flatter themselves that temptation was their property alone, and their right to indulge it their own prerogative? Temptation? What did they know of temptation that older women did not know? Nay, of temptation they knew nothing, for they made not the least effort to withstand it. Temptation had no terrors for those who never resisted. How could these learn what true temptation was, or the dreadful courage needed for its overthrow? Let them first wage a life-long war against temptation as Miss Parkworth had done, armed with no better weapon than self-respect and duty. Yes, their whole life-time let them give, as she had done, to trampling down insurgent feelings. Even as a girl she had stood behind the curtains in her mother's time, and looked upon the doings of her sex with horror. Envy? Nay. Hotly she repudiated such a word. Envy it never was. She might have envied them their liberty, perhaps—for liberty was a thing dear to the unsophisticated hearts of all young people. But she had been shocked at the pernicious use they made of it. She had sat with her mother at that very window and shared her

consternation at the awful instances revealed to them. Some of the expressions which served the needs of consternation to-day were a heritage from her mother's lips: "No good can ever come of it." "They are only laying up wretchedness for themselves." "There will be a terrible awakening." For more than thirty years that terrible awakening had formed an article of her faith. It had been a pillar to her righteousness; a comfort to her solitude; a prop and stay in moments of despondency. It was right that there should be a day of terrible awakening for evildoers. If there were no such day of terrible awakening, on what dread law did respectability repose? And here was the proof of it. Here was the justification of her faith—sore tried, but now (thank God!) triumphant. Oh! what she had escaped. What tears, what groans, what degradation and wretchedness. Here, through the medium of this young girl's tortured mind and body, she tasted the seraphic reward at last, to which her years of uncompromising respectability entitled her.

XIV

"You have quite upset me!" Miss Parkworth exclaimed at length. "I declare. I am all of a tremble. And on a Sunday too. Much good my going to church this morning will have done me!

"You will have to go," she decided. "In view of such a thing as this I could not keep you. No. I would not have you in the house another day. I wouldn't be responsible for you. Not if it was ever

so. I shall write to your mother at once. She must come and fetch you away. After what has happened I wouldn't trust you to go alone."

At sound of the dread word " mother " a convulsive movement shook the girl's limbs. She flung out her two hands appealingly towards Miss Parkworth and threw the spread fingers over her face.

" Oh'm, don't ! " she begged in a whisper of intensity. " Don't write to her. Don't let her know'm. Don't send me away. At least not yet. Not while it's nearer time. Don't'm. Don't. Let me stay wi' you."

" Nonsense ! " Miss Parkworth said peremptorily, treading underfoot this preposterous spark of hope. " You have no right to ask such a thing. You have no right to ask *any*thing, after your scandalous treatment of me. You have deceived me grossly. Wickedly. You are not fit for decent service. You are only fit for——" She closed her mouth sharply with the tightness of repugnance. " I would not like to say what. At your age ! It is scandalous. Disgraceful."

" I'll work for nothing if you'll only not let me go'm," droned the dreary cadence of the girl's voice the moment that Miss Parkworth ceased speaking. " You needn't pay me no wages. I'll do aught you bid me. I won't ask no more nights out. I'll stop i' kitchen all time."

" Stop in the kitchen ! " Miss Parkworth's indignation cried. " Yes ! Now that the mischief is done you want to make my house a place to hide disgrace in ! Do anything I bid you ? Oh ! a nice thing indeed, now that there is nothing left for decency to

bid you. You are past bidding. I would scorn to bid you anything. No. To-morrow you shall pack your box and go."

"Oh'm!" the girl implored, sitting sideways on her chair, and supplicating her mistress blindly through the intermediation of the kitchen wall. "Don't let me go'm. Don't't'm! Don't send for my mother. I couldn't bide. I think too much about her."

"Much you have thought about her," Miss Parkworth decided bitterly. "Much you have thought about *me*—or anybody but your shameful self. You do not deserve to have such a mother. Or such a mistress."

"It's my father I dread most'm," the girl confessed. "Oh'm, if you send me back he'll kill me!"

"You should have thought of that before," Miss Parkworth said with lips of steel. Oh! she would have no mercy on this shameful creature whose terror sought in every direction a hiding-place from her disgrace. "If you had thought of your father and your mother at the proper time, this would not have happened. You would have had no need to think of them now."

"I won't be sent home," the girl declared emphatically, with sudden desperation. "I won't go'm. I dursn't. I'll drown myself sooner, same as another young woman I know did."

"*Drown* yourself!" Miss Parkworth cried, shocked out of her iron composure by the tragic horror of the threat. "Hush! Hush this moment. Do you hear? How dare you utter such wicked things in my kitchen! I will not listen to you. One wickedness does not

excuse another. At your age, to talk like that of taking your own life for a mere nothing when it has only just begun. I am surprised at you. I gave you credit for more sense. Never speak of such a thing again. Do you hear? Never so much as speak or think of such a thing again."

The rebuke, administered like a dash of cold water, was not without effect. It silenced the new maid's voice and served as a styptic to her tears.

"Wipe your nose," Miss Parkworth commanded her. "And sit straight on your chair. Put your legs together. The way you're sitting now isn't positively respectable. It's not at all the right way to sit in a kitchen. You seem to forget *me*." The girl drew herself together, as directed; and feeling all at once the force of discipline, recalled by that last phrase, too strong for her, rose weakly to her feet, only to be re-seated immediately by a sharp wave of Miss Parkworth's hand.

"No. I didn't mean that. Sit down. Turn your chair more towards the table; the edge of the rocker has caught against the hearthrug.

"Now *my* troubles begin. You never think of those. I've got all the thinking to do. Whatever a servant goes and does, it's always her mistress that has to bear the brunt of it. There you sit staring at the fire, but *I* can't sit by the fire. I've got to set my mind to work, deciding all sorts of questions. There'll be the registry office to visit now, of course, and girls to interview. And mistresses to call on and write to. As if I hadn't plenty of things to worry me, without them."

She left the kitchen for awhile, impelled by a sense of dignity and the feeling of dramatic fitness, and paced the darkness of the parlour, relieved only by the attenuated beams from the street lamp across the road, that printed magnified and ghostly patterns of the curtain on her hands and forehead each time she drew near it. A faint, fine haze forlornly clung about the lamp and street, and in the melancholy autumn air still moved those dubious figures of the dark—eternal symbols of promiscuous night and of the dreadful day of wakening to follow. But now they seemed invested with the strangest insubstantiality, they showed more shadowy than shade. Life's interest, for Miss Parkworth, was concentrated in the kitchen. And before long she was back again at the sharp focus-point of speculation. That inert figure of distress, disposed upon the rocking-chair beneath the gaslight, drew her irresistibly, as harps draw souls to heaven. There was much she had to ask ; much she had to learn ; much on which it was the duty of a mistress to be informed. She marched into the kitchen with the emphatic footstep of one who has a distasteful duty to perform, and is resolved to do it thoroughly and quickly. She held her head deliberately high, to express dissociation from a topic so shamefully beneath it ; her mouth appeared to have milled edges, and was shrunk to the size of a shilling. As she entered the kitchen she lifted up an authoritative hand, palm outward, fingers uppermost, for the maid, roused out of her stupor of distress, betrayed a startled tendency to struggle to her feet.

" Sit where you are," Miss Parkworth ordered her. " I do not wish you to rise." It was an act of clemency designed to prove, beyond dispute, to both of them that even at such an hour as this she did not fail to pay regard to the comfort of her servants. Besides, this figure of distress was more at her mercy seated. Miss Parkworth's eye possessed more purchase; it had a better leverage; a firmer hold of what it looked on.

" How long have you been deceiving me? " she asked severely, and at once the girl's tears began to flow again; not noisily, but with insistence, as though she spread their liquid curtain between herself and rightful anger. They were a trap contrived for sympathy, and Miss Parkworth rigidly ignored them.

" I don't know'm," the girl wept.

" Nonsense! You *must* know. When did you discover your condition? "

" I begun to be afraid last Monday'm." the girl confessed. " But I thought——"

" Last Monday! A week ago! Then this—this has happened since you came to *me*! " The girl made no reply save such as was conveyed by a snivel of assent.

" And all this while," Miss Parkworth declared, with growing emphasis of the disgust and indignation that possessed her, " that I have trusted you implicitly, letting you go out at night, this is the disgraceful way you have been behaving! This is the way you have abused my confidence. You knew that you were allowed to have no dealings with young men. Your mother knew it. You both knew it. I have taxed

you in this very kitchen, and you have persistently denied it. And now——" Oh! the thought of all this creature's falsehoods, uttered and implicit, of all her deceits and hypocrisies, of all her specious goings and comings, of all her looks of shrinking modesty and innocence with which Miss Parkworth's wisdom had been held at bay so long, mounted to her brain like a nausea. But she curbed the just resentment to which she was entitled, by a spasmodic gripping of the hands, and forced herself back to the rigid path of enquiry.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

"Who's which'm?" the maid enquired languidly.

"You know very well who I mean. Who is it that has got you into this disgraceful state? You will have to be married, I suppose," she reflected. "Whoever it is." And the sudden envisaging of so shameful a necessity revolted her. "Married! You, at your age! With absolutely no idea of housework, unless there's someone to stand over you the whole time. My goodness! It's too terrible to think of. For a girl like you to go and bring somebody else into the world before you've learned properly to look after yourself! It's not "—Miss Parkworth clutched at the inspiration with a new access of horror—"it's not that dreadful man who pretended to help you with your box?"

"Him?" said the new maid with a voice listlessly contemptuous. "Oh, no'm! I should never 'a thought of—I haven't spoke to him but twice since you told me I wasn't to."

"Twice!" Miss Parkworth's mouth was charged with explosive indignation, like a gun; and for one moment she aimed it at the speaker as if she would

have fired point blank. The next, she let the baleful weapon drop, deeming a cartridge expended on such a hopeless quarry waste and vain. "My gracious!" she exclaimed instead, with a gesture of futility "Who is it, then?" she asked.

"They call him Albert'm," the maid confessed.

"Albert what?"

"I don't know'm. I never heard his other name."

Didn't know. Never heard his other name! And the most appalling part about this sorry business was that the young girl communicated her dreadful information in a voice of trouble, to be sure, but of trouble so prosaic, so unperturbed, so acceptive of itself, so incurious in regard to anything beyond fact, that Miss Parkworth's assurance nearly forsook her. For a moment her comprehension swam. She could find no words to frame it. Never had she suspected that the Outer Life—scanned so distrustfully from her windows all these years—could be anything so terrible as this. Oh! it was monstrous. Her indignation seemed to need some larger target than the pitiable figure huddled on its chair. It turned vehemently against the race of guilty mothers, senseless mistresses, culpable city councils, indolent police. What were they thinking of! What was everybody thinking of—to let such shocking things as this take place!

"Not know his name!" she cried. "And you actually permitted—— But you will *have* to know his name. It is your business to find out. He cannot be allowed to go unpunished. Whoever he is, he will have to be brought to book." The shadow of her indignation passed from the race of mothers, mistresses,

daughters, police authorities, and councils, to the race of men. In this issue she took sides with her sex. It was these dissolute and idle men who were at the root of all evil; pursuing foolish girls, and converting respectable servants into slattern wives and mothers before their time. "He will have to make amends and pay the consequences. Men must be taught they cannot play fast and loose with young girls' feelings for nothing." Yet almost in the same breath, goaded by the victim's aggravating calm, she withdrew her indignation from the masculine offender and turned it swiftly, like a fire-hose, in the direction of the figure on the chair. "Don't tell me you didn't encourage him," she said. "I won't believe you. You must have done. Men don't speak to girls without encouragement. I know what girls do when they think they're out of my sight. I've seen them do it. They behave disgracefully. They seem as if they're not content unless they make every man turn round and look at them." And after she had expended some part of her fury on this aspect of her own sex, and ruthlessly exposed its methods, she turned upon the male delinquent once again. "Who is he? What is he? Where does he live? How did you come to make his acquaintance? Where did you first meet him? Answer me at once. I insist on being told."

XV

Phrase by phrase the girl divulged such meagre knowledge as she had. Its scantiness was (to the listener) appalling. She seemed to have been betrayed

by some spectre of anonymity rather than by a being of flesh and blood. Her shame lacked even decent parentage; its very self was illegitimate. As to that first question: "Who is he?" she openly confessed her inability to answer.

"I don't know'm."

But as to the second, and third, she told her mistress with something not unlike a breath of pride:

"He's a traveller'm."

"A traveller! Good gracious! What sort of a traveller?"

The new maid was not completely sure, but she had understood him to say he sold a lot of jewellery. "He wore a lovely ring'm on his finger, with a blue stone in it. He did tell me name, an' all, but I've forgot'm. And he had a gold watch." Touching his appearance, the girl was deficient in those descriptive details requisite to satisfy so precise and accurate a mind as Miss Parkworth's. She seemed only capable of affirming that he was a nice-looking young man'm, with white cuffs and low shoes; spoke beautiful, and would have been took by anybody for a real gentleman. If Miss Parkworth had occasion to cast appealing eyes to heaven through the kitchen ceiling once during the course of what she heard, she must have done so a dozen times. As to his place of domicile (the girl communicated) it was London'm.

"London!" cried Miss Parkworth. That symbol of all the concentrated wickedness in Britain caused her flesh to creep.

"He told me London was a lovely place'm," the

new maid snivelled, with the faint reflection of a bygone rapture in her voice and face. "He said I ought to go there some day. He said if ever I did'm, I was to let him know. He'd show me all there was to see'm."

"My goodness!" Miss Parkworth uttered, with a rounded mouth of stupefaction, as if the last breath in her body had ebbed out of it. "I think he's shown you enough already. There's no need to go to London. It couldn't possibly be wickeder than where you are." Touching their acquaintance, it had (as the girl confided) a very natural origin. He had spoke to her one night'm, as anybody might do.

"*Any*body might do!" expostulated Miss Parkworth. "Do you actually mean to say that you allow *any* strange man to address you in the open street?"

"Oh, no'm," the girl was quick to answer. "He wouldn't have spoke to me at all, nor I shouldn't have let him, if it hadn't been for him hearing me ask another friend of mine what time it was."

"*Another* friend?" Miss Parkworth interposed. "*Which* other friend? I understood you only had one."

"That was the one'm," the girl assured her quickly. "She was stood along with me."

"Stood with you? Where? I told you never to stand in the street. You gave me your solemn word you never did; you said you would never think of doing such a thing. All this comes of disobeying me."

"We wasn't stood'm," the girl amended, "we was just waiting at street corner for a car to go by. I asks her what time it was. He tells me, and shows me his

gold watch, and asks me what I thought of it. With that we gets talking'm."

"And your friend?" Miss Parkworth interrogated sternly. "Your friend, that you deceived me into thinking you were safely with on your nights out. Though I never for one moment believed you. I suspected her from the first. Where was she all the while? What was happening to her?"

"Oh, her'm!" said the new maid, with a curious relaxing of the voice, as if (for a moment) her interest had waned. "She goes with another young man'm."

"*Goes!*" Miss Parkworth repeated, underscoring the word with the blackest lines of emphasis and query. "Goes where? Where does she go? Where did you go, both of you?"

To various places (it appeared), as their own whim or the weather prompted.

"To the West Fields, I suppose," Miss Parkworth said, with terrible acerbity. "What? Yes. And you used," she said, with mounting indignation, "actually to walk up the main street in the sight of everybody, rather than come round this way, where it was quiet, and run the risk of letting me see you. You went to every possible length to try and keep me in the dark. And you would be there at this very moment if you hadn't been punished as you are."

"He's gone'm," the maid confided mournfully. "If he'd been here he was to have met me on Wednesday. I walked all over, looking for him. I couldn't find him anywhere where he used to be. Another young man told me he was gone and all. He said he'd seen him go."

" Another young man ! " Miss Parkworth's indignation almost choked her. She had had such heavy helpings of this dreadful fare that all at once her appetite revolted. She pushed away the nauseating plate.

" Hush ! " she commanded. " Not another word. I will listen to no more. It is scandalous. Disgraceful. You are lost to every sense of decency. To-morrow you shall go. I shall write to your mother. No, I will telegraph for her. I will not have you on my hands another day."

And she swept out of the kitchen on a surge of righteous anger, to digest at leisure this repugnant food. To and fro she paced in the darkness of the front parlour. From time to time exclamations rose to her lips and broke there like the bubbles that rise and burst from the agitated bosom of boiling syrup. " My gracious me ! To think of it ! What are we coming to ! " Pacing thus, and wrapped in these abstractions, it came upon her with a shock to realise that the outer tide had turned. All the dubious human figures were moving once again in the direction of the town. Some were even hastening distractedly at a pace between a walk and a run—wretched girls recalled from dreams of dalliance to harsh reality ; stumbling like sleepers too abruptly roused, nor yet awake to aught except their terrors, and wildly formulating falsehoods as they ran.

" What ! " Miss Parkworth exclaimed, herself recalled by this familiar evidence of the lateness of the hour to time's existence. " Running already ! Then it must be turned half-past nine." For in her long

experience she had learned that they never ran before. She pressed her nose against the vague dial of the clock and read the confirmation of her judgment. "Twenty minutes to ten!" She withdrew her nose from the mantelpiece as if the clock had bitten it, and bore the news back to the kitchen.

"Do you know what the time is?" The figure of distress rose vaguely to its feet, and Miss Parkworth lifted no deterrent hand. "It's close on ten! Whatever's the good of giving you a clock in the kitchen if you won't take the trouble to look at it! Here, get your supper at once, and be off to bed with you. I never heard of such a thing. You're upsetting the whole house. At this rate we shall be up till midnight. Have you forgotten to-morrow is washday?" Caught in the ruthless mechanism of her own domestic machinery, she was carried round by a fresh set of emotions, that revolved without reference to the human element in life. It was the blankness of the girl's face that first recalled her to the dreadful havoc wrought in the fabric of custom.

"Washday!" she repeated, and the word this second time was all lit up with fiery understanding, as if she brandished a torch. "And you with no more thought than to go and get yourself in that state——" She could not find expression for the disgust that filled her. "A fortnight's wash, and a thing like this to happen! As if I haven't anxieties enough of my own in the house, without you bringing your disgraceful troubles in.

"Come! Do you intend to get your supper or not?"

The girl shook a melancholy head. "I couldn't eat a bite'm." She wept no longer, but now that the stimulus of confession was removed her face betrayed the ravages of tears, and showed wetter and more miserable than before.

"But you've *got* to eat a bite," Miss Parkworth insisted. "You've got to eat something. I can't let a servant of mine go off to bed like that, whatever she's done."

But when the new maid, declining even the proffer of a milk biscuit on the score that it would choke her, enquired, "Is there anything I can do for you'm before I go upstairs'm?" Miss Parkworth's Christian solicitude for others turned, in her own case, to steel. "Certainly not. You can do nothing for me. If I want anything I will get it for myself. Not that I shall want it. My goodness! I have had enough to last me for a long time." As for her going to bed (she said), it was labour wasted. "Do you think I shall be able to get any sleep after what has happened? No. Not a wink. Come, get your candle lighted."

The girl produced her candle from the kitchen cupboard, lit it with a tremulous hand beneath Miss Parkworth's glittering eye, and moved irresolutely to the door.

"Good-night'm," she said, after a moment's hesitation, in a voice so low as to be almost prostrate in its abasement. Miss Parkworth clipped her hands convulsively together and hardened her mouth as though with the determination to let no further word escape it.

"Good-night," she said at length, and the words came out with keen metallic censure.

"Oh'm!" the new maid begged at that, drawing hope even from words like these, so utterly lacking in the promise of it. "Don't send me away to-morrow! Let me stop washday over, at least. I beg of you, missus!"

"After what has happened," said Miss Parkworth, "you have no right to beg me anything. No, not anything. You have wronged me too grievously. But I do not wish to be unnecessarily severe. Time will punish you enough, my word! without me. As for helping with the wash—I shall have to think it over. I will see."

XVI

She thought it over. She saw. She did not wish to do anything in haste or anger, for all that justice now entitled her to act towards the girl as badly as she chose. Consequently, since the maid had craved this boon with tears, she should be suffered to take her part in the fortnight's wash.

Not, Miss Parkworth sternly warned the recipient of her favour, that she was to build false hopes upon this act of clemency. No. To-morrow—or the day after—or Wednesday at the very latest, she would have to go. Yes. As soon as Miss Parkworth found time, and could compose herself sufficiently to write to the girl's mother, she must pack up her box and get herself prepared to go. Miss Parkworth would not keep her. She would not have such a creature

in her house. What a night she had spent last night? She did not want to spend another night like that. No, she would not spend another night like that for anybody.

For as soon as the maid had dragged her broken limbs to bed behind the waving candlestick; as soon as Miss Parkworth had heard—or, rather, failed to hear—the closing of her bedroom door (coming expressly to the stair-foot to listen for the sound of it), indignation, kept alive by the delinquent's presence, died down like an unreplenished fire. Sympathy, remorse even, laid hold upon her. Had she spoken too harshly to a fellow-creature in distress? Had she put upon this young girl's shoulders a greater burden of rebuke than shame could bear? That disturbing hint of self-destruction, breathed (she had first believed) at random, and by lips reckless of what they said, lingered like an autumn odour in the air. The stair-foot drew her with a rope of apprehension. She laid hold of the baluster from time to time and listened to the quietude above, until it was no longer bearable. She spoke the new maid's name: "Mary! Mary!"—at first in a subdued whisper, whose chief intent was to escape being heard; more loudly after that; peremptorily at length, when it brought no answer from above. Bearing a heart that beat, and borne by knees that trembled, she laboured up the staircase to the girl's room; knocked with repressed urgency at the door, and opened it.

"Mary!" She had to say the name again before, emerging from a rustle of uplifted bedclothes, the girl's voice answered somnolently: "Yes'm."

"Are you in bed?"

"Yes'm."

"Why didn't you answer me before?"

"Was you calling of me'm?"

"I have called you four times. What are you doing?"

"I think I must 'a been asleep," the maid replied, with contrition in her tone.

"Asleep! At a time like this!" What! She had been expending all these terrible emotions on a creature who had so little concern for herself and future as to be able to fall asleep the moment she touched her pillow!

"Do you want me'm?" the girl enquired, and Miss Parkworth answered in a voice of thinly veiled disgust:

"No. Get to sleep again with you. I will keep what I have to say till morning."

"Psha!" she said to herself in going downstairs. "I might have spared myself anxiety. Nothing troubles them. Drown herself? Not she. It was only bravado. She'd rather be disgraced a dozen times."

Nevertheless, she stood twice more beside the stair-foot, and listened intently by the girl's door for some minutes before seeking the disquiet of her own bed. For she did not sleep. How could she? How could any mistress sleep with *this* in the house? Her emotions went perpetually round with her, like a whirligig at a fair. Now she rode upon indignation; anon she revolved on sympathy, as if they had been wooden horses. When she grew tired of one steed she turned to another; she rode in turn remorse, and

self-commiseration, and tenderness, and severity. It seemed as if all the prejudices and antipathies of years were astir within her. Yes, and the dead hopes and fears and feelings of a lifetime, resurrected awfully, like corpses from their graves. Custom and convention had shaped a self out of her, but it was not her true, or whole, or only self. There dwelt another self beside, a sort of frail and spectral sister, seldom seen, and mostly silent, who moved about the corridors of consciousness at times like these ; solicitous, beseechful ; as though begging for that to be restored of which the years and tyrannous propriety had robbed her. The first blazing fire of indignation burned low. Anger died forlornly out, and Miss Parkworth found no fuel to replenish it. All within her turned to ash and emptiness, and from her mouth the recent taste of triumph faded utterly. Nay! To warm exultant fingers at the fire of another's shame was an unworthy, an ignoble thing. Exhausted with her own rancour, Miss Parkworth turned towards pity at last, as towards a sanctuary. There alone was comfort to be found. Let her put aside these harsh and bitter thoughts that consumed only the thinker.

" I ought to pity her," she said. " After all, we are of the same sex. She is only a child. Oh ! it is tragic—tragic. What does she know, at her age, of the ways of men and of the world ? " The things which in her first indignation Miss Parkworth had taken for depravity were staring proofs of innocence. Prejudice had blinded her ; resentments had wrapped a bandage about her eyes. Long-sealed doors and windows opened in her womanhood, and the sweetening

breeze of a divine compassion swept through her, breathing hymnal music in her soul. Of the girl's deceptiveness she would no longer think. "I do not know all," she said. "He alone knows all from whose hand pardon comes. Purity and innocence may be misled." And she purged her fifty years of the animosity they bore towards youth. "It is wrong of me," she owned, "to ask of youth the wisdom I have only gained by losing it. Because I never had a youth to speak of, must I perpetually envy those who have it, and rejoice when it causes them to stumble? After all, youth is a precious heritage. Nothing else in life can make up to us for that. To my cost I know it." And on her pillow she shed tears for youth in general, and for her own lost youth in sorrowful particular. Yes, she wept more bitterly than her servant-maid had done. She wept with such a copious surrender of herself and tears as for years she had lacked capacity to enjoy. She flushed her very soul of the salts and acids that experience had secreted in it. She cleansed it almost to its native freshness and simplicity. Her soul attained that humble state in which it owned things long denied. They were right (she said) who told her that marriage had been her true vocation, and that she ought to have embraced it years before. Marriage was a great enlarger of the soul; a great broadener of the thoroughfares of sympathy. Try howsoever she would, her spinsterhood could never bring itself to that degree of tolerance displayed by her married friends, which goaded her to hatred and to envy. Her wisdom was acuter; it would have passed through a needle's eye, but it had sharpness and no

breadth ; it pricked without magnanimity or mercy ; it was become a veritable sting ; she could no longer use it save as a weapon of offence, an instrument of hurt. Even her so-called friends did not seek assistance of her wisdom ; they shunned it ; they shunned her. For over thirty years she had warred a secret war against them and the world. She had been an enemy of society, hating it at heart for what it had withheld from her ; for the joys it might have given her, and had not ; devising, under the cloak of friendship, only how to wound it. And all at once, precipitated by events of the last few hours, she found herself stripped of her illusions and her armour. She awoke to the hopelessness of the war she waged, and to the bitter loneliness of the life she led. This ill-starred maid and she had much in common. They were outcasts from society, both of them ; she through the odium of her respectability ; the maid through lack of it. All Miss Parkworth's life she had paid the proprieties too much respect. She had been a slave to them, and they had been tyrants over her, ruling her with rods of iron ; chastising her with scorpions ; taking from her—as of right—the priceless sacrifices made—her youth, her hopes—and rendering her nothing in return but vain regrets and the disregarded loneliness of age. She cried a dozen times in thought : " Oh ! if only I had my life to live over again," and had not courage to complete the wish. Why, it was not courage that lacked. Determination failed her, too. She knew not rightly what it was she would have wished or chosen of her own free will. She was imbued with the grim belief that life had

somehow wronged her, as it had wronged this hapless girl; that both of them were victims of unpitying circumstance. And a sense of sistership with the frail delinquent awoke in her. She knew what sort of judgment the world would pass upon the girl's offence. At such a bar no mercy could be looked for. "Oh'm,"—the memory of the new maid's imploration came back to her with a pathos it had lacked before—"don't send me away. Let me stay'm. I'd sooner be with you than anybody. I'll work without a wage—if only you'll let me." A fierce defensive spirit burned in her. The world was no friend of hers; she quivered with an unborn determination to pit herself against it. Yes, to make the stiffness of its neck a footstool for righteous indignation to tread on; to interpose her arm between this trembling victim and the world's despite.

"Poor child!" she said. "Poor child! She has been shamefully, cruelly treated. She will need all the pity that is likely to be given her—before the end."

XVII

It is true that the softening of her sympathies and her revolt against the world and its conventions, took place in darkness and in bed—where all courages attain their maximum, and tender sentiments unfold so lavishly that, like indiscreet June roses, they are often overblown and dashed by morning. As darkness turned to dawn, and cold daylight showed its uncompromising visage at Miss Parkworth's window, she

felt the need to clear up the evidences of emotional disorder ; to put all tell-tale feelings into the decorous repositories provided for them. It was no more seemly to have the sentiments exposed to view than to have one's intimate apparel left disorderly, or the contents of a work-box littered on the floor. By the time Miss Parkworth heard the alarm clock discharge its muffled battery in the maid's bedroom she had put aside every outward vestige of emotion. She donned assurance with her corset , got back into the old familiar, rigid, narrow, stucco-fronted self in which alone she found the requisite discomforts to preserve identity and make her feel at ease. For Miss Parkworth's periodic rebellions against her own life and society were usually no more than emotional spring-cleans. She turned out all the furniture of the soul ; for awhile disorder reigned supreme, and she gloried in it ; but it served only as her preparation for a more rigorous state of order than before. All went back into its place ; at heart she was too punctilious for a revolutionary. The head that issued from her bedroom door was in external features the same head ; the voice that cried out the new maid's name to the higher landing was the same voice that had disturbed her sleep last night.

" Mary ! Mary ! Did you hear that clock ? It's been gone nearly five minutes. What are you doing ? Are you getting up ? "

Yes'm. The maid had heard it. She was getting up. She was just fastening her frock collar. She was coming down'm.

And yet, despite the sharpness of Miss Parkworth's

challenge, a feeling of inexpressible relief, of thankfulness even, went through her at the sound of the familiar voice. Its meekness brought comfort; it relaxed the tension of the house. The maid was there —still there.

"Let me see you before you go downstairs," Miss Parkworth ordered. And it was then, after the maid had humbly knocked at her bedroom door, that she communicated her qualified determination, frigid and formal. But underneath this frozen externality Miss Parkworth was conscious of a curious warmth of feeling. Something of last night's sentiment still glowed in her with the persistence of a fever, that only rigorous measures tended to subdue. All the while that she spoke to the girl, detaining her for observation with curt behests and counsel, she scanned the face of trouble. It was an attractive face. Yes. Miss Parkworth would not dissemble to herself. It was an attractive face; an extremely attractive face. Trouble seemed, indeed, to suit it; it sat well upon the deep eyes and timid mouth. Miss Parkworth fancied—it might be but her fancy—that the face bore a certain resemblance to her own face of years ago, before the world had hardened it. And she was agreeably impressed with its behaviour, under the announcement of respite. No unguarded glint of triumph came into the eyes, or victorious hardening of the cheek for a purpose carried. Instead, the face subdued itself to a deeper humbleness. "Oh'm!" the maid exclaimed, and flushed with unspeakable gratitude to the roots of her hair. She looked so innocent, so childlike, so guileless, suffused thus with

the embarrassment of a modesty without words, that Miss Parkworth found it hard to credit that she had —that she was—that she could ever have—— It seemed singular that there should be so little sign. Even after the girl's definite avowal of last night Miss Parkworth felt a tendency to doubt and disbelieve plain evidence, as though the truth of this dreadful matter depended less on fact than on opinion. Indeed, her feeling of uncertainty was so pronounced that, at breakfast-time, the desire to solve it by direct interrogation had become a necessity.

" I suppose," she charged the new maid, " you have nothing to add to what was said last night? I am still to believe—all that you told me? "

" If you please'm," the maid responded, in her lowest tone of voice.

" It is very terrible ! " Miss Parkworth commented, shocked afresh by the assurance. " I declare I daren't think what's going to be the end of it all."

XVIII

The washday passed, and a second and a third day succeeded it, and still the new maid stayed on under indefinite reprieve; and Miss Parkworth thought things over, and took no step. The notification to the girl's mother remained unwritten—a Damoclean threat above the girl's head, suspended by a hair. No visit was paid to any of the despised registry offices for domestic servants, although the new maid had a spasm every time her mistress went out or came in.

" Oh'm, you're never going there ! " " Oh'm, you've never been there ! "

No, Miss Parkworth had not been there. That is, not yet. Miss Parkworth, of course, would *have* to go there. Circumstances admitted no alternative. But for the present she preferred to think things over. Meanwhile she kept her own counsel, and that closely. She divulged no breath to any of her friends of what had happened, and she imposed the strictest secrecy upon the maid. Secrecy, indeed, constituted the terms on which alone the girl was suffered to remain.

" If so much as a word of this leaks out," Miss Parkworth warned her, " and comes to my ears (as it is bound to do), you will have to go at once. Yes, at once, without further warning. I would not have you in my house a single moment after your condition was known. My goodness ! whatever would people say about me ! They would cry shame upon me ! They would say I was as much to blame as you."

Already Miss Parkworth feared she had placed herself in a false position. She had allowed her foolish sympathies to run away with her. " I ought to have let you go at once ! " she said emphatically. " I know what I ought to have done—at once. I ought never to have listened to you.

" Does your friend know anything of your condition ? " she broke off anxiously to enquire, and the girl repudiated the aspersion hotly.

" Her'm ? " she said. " Oh, no'm. I wouldn't tell her nothing for anything, not if it was ever so. I wouldn't trust her'm."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure'm."

"Yes, but I'm *not* so sure," Miss Parkworth commented darkly. "You are easily led. People have only to ask you a question and you answer them at once. The moment I began to question you on Sunday —out it all came."

"Only to you'm," the maid protested, and Miss Parkworth said:

"I wish I could believe it. But I can't. You lack proper self-control. You have no reserve. You would talk with anybody. With perfect strangers. You have told me so yourself. I am frightened of that tongue of yours; positively frightened. I am afraid it will betray us both."

Indeed, Miss Parkworth lived in doubt and dread of it. She feared to send the girl on an errand—even to the grocer's—and only despatched her after stringent admonition. "Now—you remember! Not a word about yourself. Or me. You are only to fetch what you are sent for and come away. I know to a second how long it ought to take you. I shall watch the clock."

And when the girl returned, she subjected her at once to the closest interrogation. Who had served her? What had they talked about? What had she said? Nothing'm. Ah! it was easy to say nothing'm.

"I wish I could believe you," was Miss Parkworth's comment.

Yet, behind this external wall of disbelief, Miss Parkworth did believe her. Against her better judgment she believed. At the very moment when—by

every rule of prudence—she should have closed the gates of confidence and locked them fast, the strongest, strangest impulses urged her to throw them open. It seemed as if her faith, so long repressed, insisted on exercising its prerogative—even on an object of more than doubtful credibility. Her trust desired, in fact, a mate, with the same vehemence and utter disregard of caution that Miss Parkworth's sex, after years of sceptic spinsterhood, too often flung itself away upon the first male that offered, and the last that—in the prime of wisdom—any woman would have chosen. Now that the girl had proved herself so utterly unworthy of all trust, Miss Parkworth was infatuated with desire to trust her. She experienced a grateful sense of companionship in the girl's presence ; a strange desire to be near her ; an inexpressible comfort in saying : " Mary——" and being answered : " Yes'm." Her sympathies became possessful ; fine protective processes, like filaments, grew out of them, enveloping the girl with a network of solicitude and guardianship. In some sort the girl seemed to belong to her. She was become Miss Parkworth's own peculiar property. Yes. Now that shame had struck her down she lay like a winged and helpless bird, dependent on the mercy of Miss Parkworth's hand. The outer world had lost its hold of her. No nights out would lure her henceforth from her mistress's possession. That possession was undisputed. Miss Parkworth shared her with none. Here at last, begotten of the flesh's imperfection, was the perfect servant-maid ; the maid Miss Parkworth all her life had dreamed of and sighed for ; the docile helpmate ; the devoted slave ; the faithful

friend ; the lovable companion. Oh, sweet it was to be served by such a one ; to have her at a word—all ears, all eyes, all eagerness—in wait upon Miss Parkworth's least desire ; a disembodied spirit of subservience, moving by wings rather than on feet, to whom no order came amiss, no duty seemed a toil. She clung to the protective wisdom of her mistress with a pathetic faith in both. Miss Parkworth felt the girl's will like wax within her power to shape and mould. Never had she handled servanthood so ductile, so plastic And the new maid's appetite for work became almost insatiable. " It keeps me from brooding'm," she said. Yet, hard though she worked, she was ever ready to volunteer some act of thoughtful, independent service for her mistress. " Shall I make you a cup of tea'm, now ? " (for instance). " There's some lovely boiling water in the kettle. Do let me'm ! " Miss Parkworth thought with poignant dismay of the time when, in the inexorable course of nature, she would be bereft of all this service and solicitude, and dwell in a house made desolate by the absence of the Perfect Maid.

" Fortunately," she consoled herself, " it will not be yet. I shall have time to look round." For she had taken the precaution—closing the kitchen door behind her—to seek first-hand enlightenment from the maid regarding a subject of such consequence to both.

" When did it—— How soon do you expect——" she asked her, and the maid with downcast eyes replied.

" You are quite sure ? " Miss Parkworth pressed, for in her experience she had been amazed at the gross

carelessness displayed about such matters. Even married women made unpardonable mistakes.

Yes'm; the maid was quite sure. Pressed by Miss Parkworth, she furnished reasons for her certitude that satisfied her mistress's requirement. "We are in good time," Miss Parkworth declared with thankfulness. "You have not left everything to the last minute, like some girls. It is far, far better to speak about such things at once. At least you never attempted to deny it. I could not have forgiven *that*.

"We shall have to think seriously," she told the maid, "about the future. It cannot be left to itself. We shall have to take measures." And, indeed, Miss Parkworth acted so thoroughly up to her own counsel that she seemed to think of nothing but the future; she scarcely left it—even for a moment—to itself. She was for ever taking measures. She took as many measures as a market haberdasher on a busy morning, when he tells off bales of calico against a yardstick. Not an hour passed but she had some solemn measurement to make. Dear though domestic supervision was to her—or had been in the past—there lay a subject now much closer to her heart, and that was the future. To some extent this girl constituted its custodian. A vital part, at least, of the mysterious future was concealed in her; she was the human repository of time-to-come. Miss Parkworth never spoke with her, or came in her vicinity, but that she thrilled with tumultuous consciousness of a third presence; of that mysterious *tertium quid* being slowly shaped by forces inexorable and unseen into the prodigious instrument of destiny. The lungs of

life, so long inhaling humdrum air, were for Miss Parkworth all at once inflated with the breath of keen adventure. For years, to be sure, she had displayed a spinster's burning interest in the unborn. It revolted, fascinated her. She hated, loved it, and trembled with apprehensions and expectancies from which a single woman should by right be free. To how many unpublished items of humanity had she not made herself a slave, dragged by overpowering force of nature against the reasoned opposition of her prejudices. She had dimmed her eyesight, worked her fingers to the bone, in the making of tiny garments for the clothing of infant nudity. She had been a martyr to other people's children, hating them in heart with every stitch contributed towards their welfare; saying resolutely: "This shall be the last. There is no keeping pace with them. People seem unable to exercise the least restraint. I am disgusted."

But these had been lawful contributions to humanity. This other, germinating darkly in the soil of shame, constituted a very different case. By right Miss Parkworth should have interposed hands of protestation and repugnance between herself and it; she should have expunged its very thought from her mind, like some rude chalk-mark from a doorstep. She—Miss Parkworth—a lady of the highest respectability and reputation. To associate her interest in secret with the product of a servant-maid's disgrace! Oh! it seemed preposterous; incredible; opposed to every principle she held; to every conception of her own self; to all she thought she was, or should be.

She tried to justify her state of mind by giving it

a selfish basis. It was expediency alone (she sought to say) that weighed with her. The maid was being allowed to stay solely for Miss Parkworth's convenience.

"My convenience must come before hers. She shall go, of course. She will *have* to go; I shall have to get rid of her. But not now. It is out of the question. I cannot string myself up to make the round of all the dreadful registry offices, or interview any more servants or mistresses at present. I am too much upset. My strength is quite unequal to it. I am no longer so young as I used to be."

XIX

Yes. She was perpetually making secret journeys to the extreme verges of her mind to seek justifications for what she did. She gathered them arduously from the bleak uplands of reason; she sought them in the enervating vales of sentiment. She plucked arguments on distant peaks that showed all the hardihood of Alpine flowers, and died in the hand that bore them. For, after all, she found no better justification than her own weakness—the irresistible force of sympathies that would not be denied. She said: "I am too sensitive—too tender-hearted. I know it. My feelings get the better of me." To confess one's weakness is almost to exalt one's strength. Fearlessly to own a fault is the most comfortable way to justify it. And she found an infinite and secret

joy in the contemplation of the unsuspected spaciousness of her own soft heart. All these years it seemed she had grievously misjudged herself; the world had misjudged her; she had accepted its own hard stamp too implicitly as her own. Yet what did she owe the world? What had the world done for her that laid her conduct under the least obligation? Nothing. Who should say that this trial had not been sent (perhaps) by providence, to give her soul the supreme opportunity for its expression? After every conflict with her harder self she sought consolation in the kitchen. "Mary!" And the sound of the girl's soft "Yes'm" and the sight of the girl's mild face were swifter, surer solvents of her doubt than any argument sustained in the privacy of the parlour. The moment Miss Parkworth's eyes rested upon this pathetic figure, made luminous by the leaden atmosphere of tragedy in which it moved, her heart softened. She slid into the warmth and comfort of her own tenderness as into a dressing-gown. Life had an object at last. It was not a state of perpetual warfare against the world and one's kind. It owned a finer purpose, a nobler end. Here, within her own house, beneath her own eyes, remote from vulgar participation, fate's slow, terrific scroll was being unfolded. Not an hour but put forth prodigious buds of possibility; the moments were alive and busy; the air of the house hummed—for ears alert and fine enough to catch the sound—with the ceaseless play of shuttles.

And all Miss Parkworth's maternity was agog; its every window alight, like a great house on the eve of

some high festival. From the tall glass-fronted bookcase in the parlour she drew forth the obese and well-worn volume of domestic medicine (compiled for the use of Parents, Guardians, Teachers, Clergymen, and Others, by a well-known Physician) which had constituted her lifelong book of reference in all cases of delicate uncertainty or sickness, and she pored assiduously over pages that the years had made familiar—pages over which her own mother had pored in turn, at a time when Miss Parkworth's self formed as yet but an untranslated fragment of the great unseen. Little though they had to teach her, that little leaped to the eye with a new and dazzling significance now, for knowledge seems never so impressive as when it comes in some fresh moment of our need of it. Facts, previously accepted with the apathy that has no present use for them, pierce the intelligence on such occasions like sharpened beams of light. Miss Parkworth was for ever rising in haste from what she read, in order to repair with some piece of urgent information to the kitchen. The new maid was but a child measured against the years and ripe experience of her mistress. She could not be expected to have knowledge of a tithe of all the dangers, pitfalls, and surprises with which her journey was beset. It would have been nothing short of sinful to suffer her to set off without a word of warning as to the dark and arduous nature of the road. Miss Parkworth packed the traveller's wallet with every sort of counsel calculated to serve her in her need. Surely no maid ever fared on such an expedition so well and wisely victualled for all contingencies. Miss Parkworth left nothing

to chance. This, she told the maid, was no time for reticence. Through ignorance the girl had fallen; she should not be sacrificed to ignorance a second time, if a seasonable word from the lips of a mistress could save her. All along the route to be traversed Miss Parkworth set up signposts for her guidance. She must not be surprised if—— It was only right she should be told that—— She ought to be prepared for—— Had she experienced—— Sometimes Miss Parkworth brought the book of family reference into the kitchen and recited salutary passages in a confidential voice for the girl's instruction. The girl listened for the most part with a dropped lip and half-averted cheek of deepened colour, exhaling a low "Thank you'm" when the reading ceased. But once or twice, stirred by what she heard to a too realistic visualisation of the future, she burst into tears and cried:

"Oh'm! Don't! Don't'm. Shut book up. I don't want to know no more."

"Shut the book up! Don't want to know any more!" Miss Parkworth protested incredulously. "I never heard of such a thing. You cannot know too much, in your condition. Do you think I am reading this for my own pleasure? My word! I have no need to read this book at all; I know everything it has to tell me. It is your own good I am thinking of."

"It makes me feel queer'm," the girl confessed faintly.

"Nonsense! You must not permit it to make you feel queer You are only at the beginning of your

experience," Miss Parkworth told her. "You have much to go through yet. The sooner you make up your mind and settle down to things the better."

These were the moments when Miss Parkworth's ancient strength returned, when she rose again to her former pinnacle of power.

"You are young," she told the quaking culprit, "far too young, indeed, to have any opinion worth considering. You must submit to be guided by one who knows infinitely more about such matters, and be deeply thankful that there is anybody willing to take charge of you and guide you through such a crisis. Not many mistresses would do it. My word! I should be sorry for you if this had taken place in *some* houses."

To all intents and purposes Miss Parkworth made the situation her own. She prepared herself to pass through her sex's most prodigious experience by proxy. She kept watch over the new maid's symptoms with a vigilance personal and poignant, holding herself alert for every development predicted by the book. Her solicitude for the maid's well-being knew no relaxation, and thrilled with the finest ecstasies of selfishness. Mary must not stay upon her feet too long. At mid-morning she must partake of light refreshment. After dinner she would be bidden to seek some minutes of repose in the rocking-chair before the fire, whilst Miss Parkworth sacrificed her own comfort in exchange for a rarer satisfaction by drying the crockery which the invalid had washed, discoursing the while on how the sitter felt. It was most important to establish the girl's health and do nothing

at this juncture to deprive her of the strength on which such summary and violent demands might at a later stage be made. Those sexual reservations which had at first vexatiously existed between two spinsters of unequal age were swept aside. By her dreadful circumstances the maid was promoted, at one bound, to the highest grade of experienced spinsterhood. Nothing needed to be hid from her, nothing mitigated or dissembled. And for a single lady of Miss Parkworth's erudition it was comfortable to have at once a servant and a confidant—one whom her wisdom could govern and in whom her weakness might confide.

And this wronged girl's face was singularly attractive of confidences. The shy eyes, too scared to see, and the modest mouth, too timid to enquire, drew confidences all the more because they seemed to shun the seeking of them. And then, too, trouble is a great encourager of trust. Much may be confided to it. As offerings are made to those that have, and gifts presented to such as show the least need of them, so is human nature led to take its troubles where already troubles are. Because this girl had touched the nadir of misfortune, and tasted the bitterest of all fruits given to her sex, Miss Parkworth felt an irresistible desire to open out the long-locked cupboard of her secret self and display things personal that prudence had kept better hid. She did not ignore the worldly unwisdom of such procedure ; the indiscretion horrified her as soon as done. She shut the cupboard door in haste, with an instant appeal to the good faith and secrecy of the spectator.

" Of course, what I have just told you," she said,

with apprehension writ upon her face, " is strictly confidential. You must never—never disclose a word of it. Not to anybody. You are the first living soul to whom I have ever thought of confiding such a thing. And I have only told you out of a feeling of deep sympathy. I thought it might be a little help and strength to you in your trouble."

But in the privacy of her own room she chid herself sternly for such imprudent divulgence. " Whatever am I thinking of," she said, " to tell her that! Am I losing all sense of discretion? "

And, agitated to a pitch of intolerable apprehension, she would sometimes return to the kitchen quitted but a moment earlier, with the girl's name anxiously upon her lips.

" Mary—Mary! You understand! I rely on you. This must be absolutely secret between us." And the girl's " Oh'm! I should never think of naming it to nobody! " though it left Miss Parkworth with no further word to say, seemed but the wan ghost of an assurance, the very vapour of a promise, lacking all corporeality or satisfaction.

" It is unwise of me," she owned. " I must keep a closer guard upon my tongue. My sympathies are utterly running away with me."

XX

But the fact is, it was not her sympathies alone that ran away with her. Another far more dangerous element than sympathy impelled these confidences—her pride. Something of the breath of long-departed

youth returned to stir the vanity of Miss Parkworth's later years, as the breath of spring wakes withered leaves to animation, prompting them proudly to protest that they had once been young and played their part in life's fair pageant. For there were moments—bitter moments—when she tasted a mortifying doubt of the girl's awareness of it. Yes, despite her fifty years Miss Parkworth still laid pretentions to the sex she stood for. She represented that sex not less emphatically than this youthful creature of her care. For all her principle and high respectability she refused to take her place in the outer vestibule of life. She declined to retire to the cloak-room, or to surrender her privilege-ticket of sex. In all the temptations by which that sex was threatened, and made perilous and sweet, she resolutely stood her ground. Shoulder to shoulder with the youngest of her sisterhood she stood; she insisted on standing. Without a sex to call for care, without a stimulating sense of danger to justify anxiety, what became of life, indeed? It was a mockery—an empty name not worth the living. She would not accept the immunity that age was ready to afford. No, she would not. Experience, not years alone, protected her. Like ancient men who insist on going to war in their country's need, if it be only to add their physical infirmities to the cause they seek to serve, Miss Parkworth's sex rose up at every bugle. The dangers of the dark—she was prepared to face them with the rest. The designs of evil men, who spoke to unsuspecting womanhood, or lay (more dreadfully) in ambush, as the papers daily testified—she valiantly bore her portion of these, too. "It is

really not safe for unaccompanied ladies to be out at night," she testified. "A man crossed the road deliberately in my direction only the other evening. For some distance, indeed, he positively walked behind me; I could hear his footsteps. It took me all my time to shake him off. I had almost to run in the end. For some minutes after reaching home I was quite upset." The real danger of tramps (Miss Parkworth maintained) consisted not in their demands for bread or money. If a lady could be quite sure they only wanted those—and would take them and be satisfied, and go—she might shed the main part of her terror. But one never knew. "I declare, it makes me very nervous at times," she owned, "to be left in the house alone. Only last week I read a shocking account of something that happened to a young girl. In broad daylight, too. One cannot be too much on one's guard."

For half the joy of life consists in one's fear of it, and to have nothing to dread is to have nothing to live for. But the maid, self-centred in the ignorance of youth, showed a tendency to place her mistress in a world apart. Deceived by Miss Parkworth's bleached hair and withered cheek, she scarcely seemed to credit her with sex at all. She viewed Miss Parkworth (so the latter feared) but as a dry and sexless wisdom; a figure of authority deriving knowledge solely out of books, who had never known life or youth at first hand. Such an erroneous and disparaging conception of her mistress's real nature could not be allowed to go unchallenged. Miss Parkworth challenged it. Tentatively, first of all, she sought to insinuate her rightful claims, but with increasing confidence as

time and the girl's insusceptibility to truth emboldened her. At last, in an undissimulated voice, feeling the need of a hearkening and sympathetic ear for the actualising of her own emotions, that, lacking some confidant, must die with her, she uncorked the secret phials of the past. Life uncommunicated is life unlived. That part of self which finds neither action nor utterance dies like a seed unshed ; it withers like a kernel in the husk ; it has secured safety in its own shelter, and perished there. Whatever else at least, and at whatever cost, this girl had lived. She had done something with her life, made something of it. Miss Parkworth had done nothing. Yet that nothing must be justified ; she would not suffer it to lie upon her like a stigma. This other one's experience should be made to serve for both ; she would share it. Yes, she would remove her own experiences into it, like furniture into a fresh house, and dispose them to advantage there, in such a setting as heretofore they lacked.

" It is not for me," she told the girl, " to blame you. No. Let those without fault throw the first stone. I may have seemed to speak sharply, bitterly. Indeed, I am aware I did. But that was only through my deep concern."

" I have been young," she said. " You may not think so. My hair was not always its present colour. It used to be nearly black, and not thin and brittle, like much of the hair one sees at present, but thick and glossy. Wonderful hair, it was. So thick, indeed, that it used to cause me headaches at times, and I could scarcely force the comb through it. And such

a length! I could scarcely make you believe. When I let it out it reached nearly as far as my knees. All my friends admired it. They said how much they envied me my hair."

On her complexion, too, she laid the flattering touch of memory, and discoursed on the brightness of her eyes, and the soundness and regularity of her teeth. Of the latter, "Until I was well turned thirty," she confessed with pride, "I had not parted with one." As a young woman, in her entirety, Miss Parkworth "supposed" that she had been not a little attractive. "Indeed," she added, lest her own modesty might leave the listener in doubt about it, "I did not lack friends to tell me so."

In those days, it seemed, she was not characterised by her present spareness of habit and austerity of line. "I should have made two of you," she told the maid. "And I bore myself well. I was often complimented on my carriage." Proudly she regraced herself with the corporeal splendours of the past, adding touch upon touch, as though she dressed a mannequin, until her faded person assumed almost its ancient stature, animated by the consciousness of what it was. The breath of pride inflated old pretensions as the breeze lends shape to garments on a clothes-line, imbuing them with such rotundity of form and dignity of motion as life itself can scarce excel.

"I know what it is to be young," she affirmed courageously. Yes, the maid had experienced nothing that lay beyond the range of Miss Parkworth's sympathy and practical appreciation. "Like you," she said, "I have been tempted! In one case—sorely

tempted," she confessed. She had been deeply fond of him ; too fond of him for prudence. And the night before he went away—for a twelvemonth, each believed ; for ever, as it happened—her feelings had got the better of her. " If he had pressed me further, then," she confided, " God knows ! I might have—life might have been very different. But it was not to be ! " A cough—a footstep on the stairs ; the sound of a timely but unwelcome voice had saved her. " It has cost me many sleepless nights," Miss Parkworth owned. " I have often wondered, but for that, what might have been. I try to tell myself that all was for the best. Perhaps such love as ours was too unwise to last. I do not know. It is a mystery.

" He was not the *only* one," her pride took care to add. " There were others, though I think he was the one I thought the most about." Like all high-spirited, attractive, irresponsible girls, she had been imprudent. She had put herself, too frequently, within the peril of her feelings. She had dared things whose dangerousness shocked her. When she recalled some of her escapades she was filled with consternation. " My dear mother would have been horrified." For instance—— Fortunately—— And yet—— But still—— The sustaining memory of indiscretions grew in her. She experienced a wondrous joy in the resuscitation of her old imprudent and audacious self ; in the re-confronting of magnified dangers ; in the playing with deadly perils that time had rendered harmless, like snakes disfanged. Not wilfully, indeed, did she exaggerate ; but age sees pitfalls unperceived

by youth, and in the atmosphere of emulation engendered by such a listener it was doubtless inevitable that circumstantial contours should be heightened, to make them worthy of their setting. In their disclosure these episodes of her earlier life suffused Miss Parkworth with a satisfaction almost vibrant. Her whole frame shook with the force of the emotions that filled it, like an ancient wine-skin reciprocating the ardours of some new and potent vintage. Not till she had reached her room again and paced the floor in a tumult of triumphant agitation did shocked prudence lay hold of her and recall her sternly to herself. More than once she came from the new maid's presence to her parlour thus, straightway to stare through her latest indiscretion with foreboding into a future overcast and vague. To what (she asked) were these emotional confidences committing her? With each fresh proof of sympathy she forged a secret obligation, for the least kind word commits in some degree the sayer of it, and an act of kindness compromises not so much the present as the future—a truth Miss Parkworth darkly divined.

"I must curb myself," she said, in the privacy of the parlour, with a resolution that failed her always in the kitchen. "I am making far too much of this girl. Unless I am very careful—I foresee a time of difficulty and trial for us both."

XXI

That time was nearer than she deemed. For the greater portion of a week Miss Parkworth lived in a state of close, of rapt, of almost mystic communion

with her maid. In the palpitating atmosphere of trouble confidence grew singularly plastic. It softened like ripening fruit, pleasant to see and handle, and gave promise of yet mellower and sweeter juices. Between maid and mistress only the finest veil of reticence was spread ; no more, in point of fact, than served to lend disclosures the zest of a secretive haze, as the translucence of apparel intensifies the nakedness of limbs that confide their reluctant shape to such precarious custody. In this congenial air, indeed, Miss Parkworth began to lose the pervasive sense of her own loneliness. Her life was no longer hedged by a low horizon of baffled doubts and vexing speculations. She annexed another world—a world of certitude and confidence—and lived and ruled in it. Despite the tragic clouds that rolled above the girl's head the future seemed full of hope—provided, to be sure, that it was not too closely scanned or questioned. Nor did the girl herself remain long insensible to the beneficent nature of her surroundings, and the soft and kindly atmosphere she lived in—sharpened, after that first dread night, by the rarest asperities on the part of her mistress. On the contrary, if anything (albeit accepting Trouble as an obligatory element of the air she was henceforth condemned to breathe) she appeared to have succeeded in eliminating it from her own mind, and to have projected it entirely outside herself. She moved beneath the shadow of it, it is true ; yet that but lightly. It seemed (rather) no more than a part of the livery of circumstance she wore, like one of her frilled caps—a thing impersonal, to be endured cheerfully and donned or doffed at will. Miss Parkworth entertained moments

of misgiving when she even asked herself if the maid could realise all the terrible responsibilities of her condition. Not that she sought to have her always weeping, for ever melancholy and depressed, crushed beneath the awful weight of what she bore. But resignation might become too cheerful. Trouble, accepted too implicitly, was in danger of forgetting the dark obligations due to its own self. At times she felt constrained to recall the girl discreetly to a remembrance of her terrible position.

"You must not lose sight of it," she said. "Each day that passes brings you nearer to what you have to go through. I don't want you to brood, but you ought to—to keep the future very constantly in mind. It will come some day very quickly, and with a shock, unless you do. One never knows."

Thus admonished, the girl subdued herself to the requisite humility at once. She was wonderfully tractable. Her countenance seemed capable of expressing any shade of sadness that Miss Parkworth desired.

But with the advent of the second week Miss Parkworth, too, awakened to the call of many obligations.

"We cannot go on indefinitely like this," she told the maid with a voice of urgency. "We shall have to do something. We ought to be taking steps to find out Albert's other name. Indeed, who is to say that Albert is his name at all? We know absolutely nothing. And time is slipping by. We must begin to make enquiries."

Startled by this unexpected call to action, the girl displayed a face of sudden horror.

"Enquiries'm?" she said, and lifted up her wrists with a gesture of despair. "Oh'm! Not yet. Let's go on as we are for awhile. There'll be time enough'm. Don't let's ask nobody nothing. I couldn't bide 'em to know."

"But they'll have to know," Miss Parkworth urged. "They'll be bound to know. The sooner it's faced the better. If we wait too long he may be getting some other wretched girl into trouble, and marrying *her* before we've time to stop him. *Then* where will you be? A man like that is capable of anything. Indeed, he may be married already for all we know. I wonder you can stand the suspense. It would kill *me*. I declare! I feel it positively more than you do. I'm always thinking about it. It keeps me awake at nights."

Yet she did not press the point against the maid's reluctance, albeit she still spoke with determination about the necessity for action, for she was aware that with the first step taken this bubble of their precious secrecy must burst at once. Nothing would remain of all its insubstantial splendour but the chill residuum of shame. Shared with a harsh, uncharitable world the secret in a trice became but sordid. All the fine emotions wrought into it would be put to rout. Unless Miss Parkworth wished, and were prepared, to be a partner in the girl's disgrace, she would be under instant obligation to dissociate herself from a contact so contaminating. She would have to take her place beside the world; she knew herself not strong enough to stand against it. The girl would have to go—at once—without a day's delay. And Miss Parkworth would be left to her own devices, shrunk once more into

the uncompromising figure of respectability ; robbed, at one fell swoop, of all the interests, compassions, benevolences, and sustaining curiosities that formed her secret hoard ; whose contemplation assuaged the emptiness and loneliness of life.

But though, indeed, she took no step—through apprehension of consequences scarcely less poignant than the girl's own—the attitude of resolution with which Miss Parkworth had first broached this topic sufficed (or so it seemed) to shake the girl's complacency. The very next time that Miss Parkworth went into the kitchen she was conscious of a subtle change in the relationship between them. Some link of confidence was lost. Shyness had come back to the girl's eye, timidity and constraint to her mouth. Trouble sat more heavily upon her, as though condensed by Miss Parkworth's admonition. And this trouble was no longer impersonal and atmospheric, an element in which the girl moved and had her being ; it was a something concrete—attached to her own self, her own mind, her own body. Trouble was a weight she bore, and stooped under, and shrank from.

Yes. Miss Parkworth felt convinced. The conviction gnawed at her with the sharp teeth of a rodent, ravelling the edges of her peace of mind. A restless and evasive element was come into the spirit of the girl. Miss Parkworth pursued a phantom thankfulness that fled from her, a gratitude afraid. The instant that she came into the kitchen she was aware of troubled looks escaping in confusion from the girl's face, of a self receding precipitately within, that left the outer spaces of the countenance unfilled. At the

first sound of her mistress's footstep the girl was up and doing in a trice; seizing at any form of activity that should afford her the pretext to turn her cheek. A word startled her; her breath quickened; her colour came and went without a cause. And once, for no reason whatsoever, Miss Parkworth caught her at an unguarded moment bathed in tears. It is true she did her best to hide them from her mistress; she displayed the cunning of a fox in her endeavours to elude detection. And with any mistress less resolute she might have succeeded. But Miss Parkworth would not be denied the right of scrutiny so startlingly disputed. She said, "What in the name of—— Turn round! Let me look at you. Are you crying?" The girl responded "No'm" in a muffled voice, and, having eased herself of this absurd denial, wept forthwith without dissimulation. She didn't know why she wept (she told her mistress), except that she'd been feeling miserable all day.

"Miserable!" Miss Parkworth exclaimed. "With everything that is done for you! How do you mean miserable? What in the world is there to feel miserable about? Of course, you must be prepared to feel miserable, in your condition. All women do. You will feel more miserable as time goes on. But you will have to grow accustomed to it." And she interrogated the maid exhaustively upon her state of health. She even fetched the volume on domestic medicine and catechised the sufferer from the open page. But though the girl, seated once more in the cane-bottomed rocking-chair at Miss Parkworth's instigation, as for that first tremendous interview,

answered all her mistress's enquiries, the answers given seemed to lack some subtle quality essential to perfect satisfaction. Miss Parkworth put the book aside at length with a sense of disappointment and dubiety. It was not the girl's betrayal of low spirits that depressed her. Bouts of despondency, in such a case, were natural and to be looked for. But it was the consciousness of a breach in their relationship, of a great rent in the tissue of confidence. For the first time since disclosure her voice failed of its power to impose thankfulness or impart comfort. The girl listened to it, indeed, but her trouble seemed too great for comfort. She took Miss Parkworth's words as the sick take plates of food that are pressed on their acceptance, and left them listlessly untasted.

"Of course," Miss Parkworth decreed, "if you are going to give way like this—after all I have done for you—I can't do any more. There is nothing else for it. You will have to go."

She did not mean the threat. She used it only with intent to rouse the girl to a sense of her position, thrusting its sharpness beneath her nose as if it had been smelling-salts. But the drastic application failed of its effect. Neither gratitude nor consternation stirred. Far from crying "Oh'm!" in a sudden voice of horror; "don't let me go. Don't'm! Keep me yet awhile. I'll promise faithful not to give way again!" the girl sat silent, sniffing only with such distress as is submissive and yields to necessity. It was Miss Parkworth who caught the full blast from her smelling-bottle and sneezed in the acrid vapour.

"Come! Rouse yourself!" she cried, with a

display of her old authority. " I will not allow you to get into these despondent moods. I absolutely forbid it. They are bad for us both. How do you think I can possibly help you to go through what you *have* to go through unless you keep up your spirits? Come now! At once! Look cheerful—do you hear? "

Yes'm. The girl heard. She rose obediently to her feet, displaying the cheerfulness of a death's head.

" It is for your own good," Miss Parkworth said, unconsciously adopting the phraseology of the girl's obliging mother. " Surely you ought to know it without being told. Your own common sense should tell you."

But if this episode stirred up disquiet in Miss Parkworth's mind, what words are capable of conveying the effect upon it when, the next day (being Wednesday), the girl enquired of her mistress after tea, in a muffled voice that issued from a mouth removed, if " she might be spared out for a short while'm." For a moment, indeed, Miss Parkworth stood as though stunned by the force of such an unexpected enquiry.

XXII

" Out! " she said. " *Out!* In *your* condition! At *this* time of night, when it's dark, and all the gas-lamps are lit! After what has happened! After all the promises you've made!

" You've given me your solemn word you would never ask to go out again. You begged me at this very door never to speak to you of nights out. You'd

had enough nights out, you said, to last you all your lifetime. My goodness, I should think you had! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"It's not—to stay'm." the girl explained in a suffocated voice. "It's only to go—somewhere."

"Go somewhere?" Miss Parkworth's apprehensions mounted thick and fast. "Go where? Where is it you want to go to?"

"Only just—as far as post'm," the girl replied, after a painful pause, and in a diminished voice.

"To the post! Right in the very middle of the town! What for?"

"To post a letter'm."

"A letter! *What* letter? I didn't know you'd written a letter. You never told me. You never let me see you. When was it written?"

"This afternoon'm."

"You cannot have written a letter this afternoon. It is impossible. You had no opportunity to write anything this afternoon. I was with you nearly the whole of the time." She paused, half stifled by the suspicions that began to thicken acridly about her, and gathered strength to launch the terrible enquiry: "Are you telling me the truth? What?" (For the girl stood mute, with downcast head.) "Are you telling me the truth? Where is the letter? Show me the letter. I insist upon seeing the letter. You shall not go out until I have seen this letter with my own eyes. Do you hear? Bring me the letter at once. Ah! I knew it!" The sharp exclamation slipped from her lips ferociously, like a ferret from a bag. For instead of stirring at her mistress's behest

the maid stayed rooted to the spot she stood on, shedding desperate tears.

"There *is* no letter!" Miss Parkworth pronounced in tones of doom that filled the kitchen. "You have stooped to falsehood for some abominable purpose of your own. Your looks betray you. You know you have."

"There is a letter'm," the maid protested through her tears.

"*Is* a letter?" Miss Parkworth echoed. "Then why do you refuse to let me see it? Because you would not dare! Yes. Because you would be too much ashamed. Who is it to, this letter? What is it about? I insist on being told."

"It's to a friend'm," the girl confessed, still weeping.

"Which friend? You don't mean——" Her suspicions foundered with her. "You don't pretend to tell me it's Albert!"

"Him'm?" No. The girl didn't mean him. He wasn't a friend of hers any longer. She wouldn't have nothing more to do with him, not if it was ever so. The letter was to—to a lady'm.

"A lady!" Miss Parkworth's curiosity surmounted her suspicions. "What in the world have you got to do with a lady? Which lady? What is her name?"

"Mrs. Jarvis'm."

"Jarvis? Jarvis? You don't mean to tell me it's that Mrs. Jarvis at the registry office? Do you?"

Aye. She wept the faster. To be sure it was what she did mean.

"It's about—about a situation'm," the girl divulged

at length. "It's a situation for a nursemaid'm, in a clergyman's family. It was in last week's *Gazette*."

For a moment Miss Parkworth stood speechless; a figure petrified, showing a graven mouth of stone.

"And you dare to tell me," she cried at last, "that you were actually going to apply for a situation as nursemaid in a clergyman's family? Behind my back! Unknown to me! After all I have done for you. After all the goodness I have lavished on you." She clipped her hands together; her breathing quickened; she rocked restlessly upon her feet, a figure of agitation compressed in iron bonds of anger. "Speak! Is this the way you dare to treat me?" Her voice rang terrible. It cleaved the air like a two-edged sword; the culprit cowered beneath an instrument of such destruction.

"After what's took place," she whimpered, "I couldn't seem to settle'm. I tried, but it didn't do no good. I felt it would be better—if I was to go. You said yourself I should have to do, and it was time we took steps. Maybe I should settle better, and be happier in a fresh place'm."

"WHAT!" cried Miss Parkworth, in tones that trembled ominously between tears and violent denunciation. "Is it only your own selfish happiness you think of? Am I to be made use of just so long as it serves your purpose, and then have all my goodness flung into my face? Happier! Happier in any place but this—that you have told me with your own lips was the happiest place to live in in the world!" She could not compass all the multitude of emotions that beset her; all the rages and mortifications that thronged

the gateways of expression. She could only make futile efforts to pluck flaming brands from the fire of her wrath and wave them terribly before the guilty form in front of her.

"What! Leave me? Leave me to go into a new situation in the state you are in, dragging your shame along with you for others to discover? Even if you are devoid of common gratitude, have you no decency left?"

For awhile, indeed, the snivelling servant seemed by silence to admit the dreadful charge.

"I didn't want to go'm," she sobbed at length contritely. "Nor I don't. I'd sooner stop where I am."

"Then whatever in the name of fortune possessed you to think of going?" Miss Parkworth demanded. "Whatever put such a terrible idea into your head?"

"I was frightened'm," the girl acknowledged. "I was afraid you'd be angry with me."

"Have I ever been angry?" Miss Parkworth protested, with a vain effort to infuse the softness of reproach and injury into her tones. "Have you ever known me angry? How dare you suggest such a wicked thing! Anger is no fault of mine. If anything I have not been half angry enough. I have spoilt you."

The girl opened an unavailing mouth, as if she strove to draw breath for a deeper purpose, and failed.

"No'm," she said, and relapsed into silence with a look of hopeless defeat.

"Stop!" Miss Parkworth said, stretching out a

forefinger. "What does all this nonsense mean? It means something. There is something you are keeping from me—something you are afraid to tell." Yes. Illumination burst upon her in a flood. "These last two days your manner has been altogether different. You have been trying to avoid me. You have not dared to look me in the face. Turn round!" She plucked the girl by the nearer arm and spun her towards the light and her own enkindled eye. "Is it something still more shameful than you have already told? Is it some disgrace of long standing?" She scoured the girl's shape with a gaze that almost stripped her. The girl shook her head.

"It's—it's not as bad as what I thought'm," she said, and her voice was depressed to extinction. Miss Parkworth's grip of the arm she held tightened like a vice.

"Not as bad—as you thought?" she echoed. "Do you mean to say—you've——"

"I've been mistook'm," the girl confided in a whisper, and plunged her face into her hands.

XXIII

As this awful confession left the girl's lips and the full meaning broke upon Miss Parkworth's brain she flung the limp arm from her with revulsion, as if it had been a serpent.

"What do I hear?" she cried, and for awhile could say no more, shaken silently by the strong gust of her emotions. "Mistaken! Do you dare to tell me," she

demanded, as soon as speech could find the outlet to her lips through the indignations besetting them, " do you actually dare to tell me that you are not in the condition you have led me to suppose ? "

From the girl's mouth issued a stricken : " I thought I was'm."

" Thought you were ! " Miss Parkworth said with rising passion. " Is that all the answer you can make, after deceiving me so grossly ? My gracious ! " She paused on the high summit of emotion, battling with the fierce breezes that blew about her. " Here I've been taking you at your word all this time, and treating you with as much consideration as if you were a respectable married woman. I've been discussing matters with you that no young girl of any decency should know about, and now you have the effrontery to tell me to my face that there is nothing at all the matter with you." She curbed the mouth of indignation with a stern bit. " How long has this deception been going on ? " she asked in a voice of glittering and unnatural calm. " When did you come to know of this disgraceful state of affairs ? "

" Only two days ago'm," the maid admitted.

" Only ! " Miss Parkworth reiterated. " Only ! And you never breathe a word to me until I wring the truth out of you. You let me go on, taking you into my inmost confidence, treating you with the most indulgent kindness. My word ! I daren't permit myself to think about it. It makes me go positively hot and cold. The things I've told you ! At your peril you repeat them ! At your peril ! Do you hear ? "

"I knew you'd be angry with me'm," the girl snivelled, "as soon as you got to know. I wanted to tell you—I've wanted for a day or two'm. I tried hard an' all yesterday, but you brought book into kitchen, and started reading to me. After that I dursn't. I didn't know what to do. I thought I'd better go'm and take another situation—sooner than vex you. Though I'd a deal rather stay where I am'm. I've got used to the place—and you."

"Stay here! With *me*!" Miss Parkworth ejaculated in a thick and curdled voice. "After your unutterable behaviour? No, never! I wouldn't have you in the house. I wouldn't be responsible for you. A girl that can go and do what you've gone and done is capable of going and doing anything. Would I trust you again? Not me. I can scarcely bear the sight of you. You shall go. At once. Yes. You shall pack your box this very night, pack up everything except what you need to sleep in. Your mother shall be sent for to fetch you. Do you hear? I wash my hands of you for good and all. I shall never breathe with confidence again until you are out of this house, and I have seen the last of you."

"Oh'm!" the girl pleaded. "Don't let my mother know. Don't send for her. I'll go away quiet if you'll only let me."

"Go quiet!" Miss Parkworth said. "Nay, that you shall not. You shall go as you deserve to go, with all the disgrace your shameless conduct merits. And don't you dare to send anybody to me for a character. If you do, I shall give it. Yes, I shall give you the character you have earned. I cannot find words to

express the disgust I feel for you. Go. Leave me. Get out of my sight at once."

Weeping automatically, the new maid melted from the door, and Miss Parkworth paced her parlour like a tigress bereft of her young. For of her young at one fell swoop she was in truth bereft. All that tender litter of young sentiments to which her soul had lately given birth was slaughtered ruthlessly. Made fierce by bitter disillusionment, she paced the parlour floor, consumed only with desire to wound, to rend with fang and claw all living, human sentiments that came in reach to mock her. Since pity, faith, and tenderness were brutally destroyed, she would be terrible. She would be the only thing that it was left to her to be. Mercy, truth, the weakness of forgiveness or compassion, should have no part in her. Implacable should be her wrath.

" The truth is not in you," she followed the weeping figure to declare. " You have told me falsehood on falsehood. I am able to believe nothing you say. No, nothing. For all I know, this friend of yours in service is nothing but an invention of your own, to cover up your carryings-on. Is she? Don't dare to tell me any more untruths. I can find out ; I *mean* to find out before I have finished. Was there such a friend? Answer me."

" There *was* a girl I knew'm," the weeping maid confessed, " but she wasn't in a situation. Not that one. She had a friend that was, but I didn't know *her*. The one I knew worked in a factory. I dursn't tell you. I thought you'd 'a been angry if you'd known."

"Then if this girl was not in service, whose kitchen did you use to sit in? *Was* there such a kitchen?"

"It was another young woman's kitchen'm. She told me about it. I was never inside. I've seen her come out at side door a time or two. Side door was up a passage'm."

"And these people—these Porters? Were they—— But why do I trouble to ask? Of course! There were no such people."

"There were'm," the maid affirmed. "Name's on a brass plate, though they don't live in street where I said they did. I thought you would 'a been angry if I'd said what street it was.

"You spoke to me that sharp'm," she told Miss Parkworth, "and looked that vexed wi' me, I didn't know what to say. I answered best road I could. I've been sorry I did, scores o' times. An' I wanted to tell you the truth, but I dursn't."

"And this chapel you were supposed to attend?" Miss Parkworth pursued. "Is that a falsehood, too—like all that you have ever told me? Have you attended any place of worship since you came?"

"Once'm," the maid acknowledged with a contrite sob. "But it felt that strange, sitting among folk I didn't know."

"Silence!" commanded Miss Parkworth, at the extremity of her iron self-possession. "Not another word. You are steeped in falsehood through and through. Who knows *what* you have been doing with yourself all the time that you have been in my

service? I've a very good mind to send for a policeman and make you open out your box before you go. Yes, a very good mind. There may be things inside that don't belong to you, things I am not likely to miss until after you are gone. Hush!" she cried, for the maid protested a tearful innocence. "Don't dare to deny it. If you deny it I shall disbelieve you at once."

"I wouldn't touch nothing belonging to nobody'm," the maid persisted. "Nor I haven't done. Box is open. It's always been left open. You can go and see for yourself'm."

"I shall certainly do so," Miss Parkworth said, "without the need for your consent. It is my right. I will be fooled by you no longer."

And she kept her passionate and hasty word. She examined the box. Not that evening, but the next day—before the girl's most sensible and obliging mother came. She marched up to the maid's bedroom, three steps in advance of the maid herself to show inalienable authority, breathing hotly like a gas-oven, and clipped her bony fingers together, and said: "Now!" in a voice so steely hard that it seemed a cold chisel would have made no appreciable impression on it. "Open the box. No, not that way. Not standing. Go down on your knees to it and turn out the things as I bid you." Meek and unprotesting, the maid did as her mistress bade her. Even under provocation she showed no tendency to be impertinent. At heart Miss Parkworth almost wished she might have been, for the girl's unwavering respectfulness rebuked her. She was within an ace of praying:

" Oh, if she would only be insolent! If she would just show herself for once in her true colours, and answer me back, and give me a chance to speak my mind!"

But the girl's abject humility defrauded her of this last and bitterest desire. She said " Yes'm," she said " No'm," with the same shy deference that she had shown on the day of her arrival. The fact that deference could now avail her nothing—since her mother had been sent for, and prayers could not save, nor insolence affect, a cause already lost—impaired the girl's respectfulness no whit. Miss Parkworth's indignation stood on the verge of hatred towards the unresentful voice that answered her, the docile hands that did her bidding. They were ministers of falsehood and deceit; she was entitled to hate them. " All of a piece with the rest of her," Miss Parkworth unpityingly affirmed. " Untruthful and deceptive to the core."

Not an item in the girl's box did she allow to pass unchallenged. Article by article she insisted on the examination of its meagre store. The girl's slight underwear; her skirts; her stockings; her handkerchiefs, she called for; transfixed each in turn with a peremptory finger of suspicion. " Stop. What have you got there? Is there anything inside? Unfold it, let me see." The box with the picture on the lid, whose significance had so baffled her, came into sight at last, and her lurking anger leaped exultantly. If she could not justify suspicion she could at least give compensation to her curiosity.

" Unlock it."

" It is unlocked'm," the girl affirmed.

" It is nothing of the sort," Miss Parkworth said. " It is locked. You know it is locked."

" It can't be locked'm," the girl contended, in tones of mild surprise that (notwithstanding) seemed to lay no charge against her mistress's suspicious certainty. " Key's been lost a long while'm. No'm. See ! " It opened in her hand with an ease that satirised Miss Parkworth's baseless doubts and lack of skill. Some wisps of wool, some safety-pins, a crochet needle, a few buttons, were all that met her outraged eye—these, and a photograph face downward, on which her indignation fastened.

" That photograph ! " she said. " Whose is it ? Show it me."

For it might be—as her anger hoped it was—the incriminating portrait of some young man. It might even be Albert. But, held to view, it confessed only the faded features of an old and wrinkled lady in a white frilled cap.

" It's my grandmother'm," the girl explained. " Her that died, I told you of. Her that's in the funeral card'm."

Rebuked by that bland and venerable countenance, as in the presence of the dead, the eye of hard suspicion quailed. Something like a pang transfixed Miss Parkworth's bosom. Her deeper, better self was stirred by an emotion that chided her : " For shame ! " But she would not yield to better feelings ; they had derided her too often. She would not relent. She would not stoop from her proud height to the least degree of tenderness. No, she would not. She was

done with tenderness that had so abused her. She would be adamant.

"It is a good thing for her she never knew you as *I* know you!" she decided sternly. "Put the protrait back. I do not wish to look at it."

To the bitter end she kept her course, and looked at all there was to see. Not that there was anything. There was nothing. She had expected nothing. The box, like life itself, was empty; empty and meaningless as the lonely world she lived in.

"That will do," she said at length. "Close the box. I have finished with you. You may go downstairs. And don't presume to come back to this bedroom without my leave or knowledge. There is no reason why you should enter it again until your mother comes to fetch you." As, in the afternoon, she did. Shortly before three o'clock her rotund figure stumbled into sight at the street end, moving with anxious haste, and Miss Parkworth tightened the buckles of her armour.

"Stay where you are," she bade the maid, "and don't show your face until I call you." For now that the episode was over and irretrievable, she entertained misgivings about her conduct in respect of the maid's box. And she would permit no secret whispering of maid and mother before her own triumphant cause was heard. "I wish to speak to your mother quite alone. I mean to tell her everything. Yes, everything. She shall know all."

XXIV

Both women were out of breath when they confronted one another at the door; the girl's mother with anxiety, Miss Parkworth with determination; the one oppressed by the unknown, the other by the known; the one desiring to be told the worst at once, the other burning to impart it.

"Whatever's amiss'm!" the mother cried. For Miss Parkworth's note had been peremptory and brief. "Where is she? Why isn't she at door? Don't tell me she's happened anything. She's never dead'm!"

But if Miss Parkworth had counted—as indeed she had—on the girl's mother's excellent common sense, convinced that it would partner her implicitly in every aspect of her indignation, she was quickly undeceived. She was deceived in the girl's mother not less completely than in the girl herself. For no sooner did the breathless woman grasp the dreadful truth imparted to her than she put off the disquietude by which she was oppressed as if it had been a shawl too hot for comfort, and said: "My goodness! is that *all*? Is that what I've been sent for like this? If I'd only known I might 'a saved myself a journey. I made sure lass was dead." And every vestige of the common sense Miss Parkworth had relied on vanished from the woman like sunlight that dies out upon a wall. She displayed more resentment than appreciation of the facts disclosed, and betrayed an inclination to dispute Miss Parkworth's point of view, bordering on impudence.

"Mistook!" she said. "Why, and a good thing

she has been an' all! It might 'a been t'other road —and then, maybe, we should both of us have had something to say. As things has turned out, you ought to be thankful, same as I am. Girl's only young; she doesn't carry *your* head on her shoulders, nor mine. It's easy for a lass like that to be mistook. Older folks can be mistook an' all. She hasn't had *my* family to go through."

To the essential monstrousness of the girl's conduct she remained wilfully and obstinately blind. She closed her eyes to truth, her ears to argument.

"I won't have a word more said again' her," she declared. "If you won't take sides for the lass, I will. She's my own. I won't submit to hear my own ill spoke of. She was a good enough lass when she lived at home, and I won't believe she's a worse lass now, for all you've tried your best to make her. She may 'a been to blame and foolish in some ways What young girl isn't? Lasses must have a bit o' liberty. Bless *me*! They can't pretend to go through life without getting theirselves into danger at times, or they'd never have a bit of pleasure nor learn nothing. But so long as a lass keeps herself respectable, like what she's done, and doesn't do nothing to disgrace herself, there's no need for you nor nobody else to throw stones at her. You was willing to keep her so long as you thought girl was in trouble, but as soon as she tells you she's got no more to be ashamed of than what you have yourself, and can hold her head up with anybody, you pack her off at a day's notice and fetch me all this way for nothing. It's neither Christian nor sensible behaviour. There's been faults

on both sides," she decided judicially, " but I'd a deal sooner own to hers than yours."

As for the pronouncement that the girl must go this very day, and it was useless to beg Miss Parkworth to reconsider her decision on the point : " Who wants to beg ! " she demanded hotly. " Not *me*, that I do know. I wouldn't let her stay in such a place, with such a mistress as you've shown yourself to be, not if you'd go on your knees to ask me. I shouldn't feel safe to leave her with you." She showed herself even more contemptuous of Miss Parkworth's threat to give no character. " Who's asking ing for a character," she declared, " from you ? Folks that knows you will know what vally to put on any character you'd be like to give. It's you that wants a character not her. And she won't lack a character, never mind what you do or say to take it from her. She had one when she first came, and it's as good to-day as it was when she brought it. Aye, and if she wants another there's plenty o' places she can go to to get it. Vicar'll give her a character any day she cares to ask for it. He's known her since she was a bairn, for all we're Primities. *He* can speak for her if you won't. The word of a Christian like him will go as far as six from such as you."

Her bosom rose. She looked twice the woman she had seemed to be when she hurried to Miss Parkworth's door, bowed beneath the burden of her fears. As for the respectfulness that had so deceived and gratified Miss Parkworth at their first meeting, she flung it aside with the contempt for an outworn shoe. If Miss Parkworth raised her voice, the woman raised hers

louder, prepared to win the combat by volume alone, or to reiterate a telling phrase until her adversary surrendered to it. At every step Miss Parkworth lost dignity and ground. Instead of bringing degradation on the girl she drew it on herself, and suffered in her own person the ignominy intended for another. For, far from making of the girl a wrongdoer to be led away in shameful custody, she only succeeded in making of her a martyr to be released with acclamation. She did not divide parent from daughter by a wall of grief and shame; on the contrary, she so tightened the bonds of kinship between them that it was she who, in her own house, occupied the place of condemnation, and was adjudged an offender against righteousness. Quivering with a sense of the injustice done to a cause so unexceptionable as hers, with the mortification of being denounced in her own home by one whom trouble should have rendered mute, she would have withdrawn from an interview degenerating into a scuffle of words, and retired upon such little dignity as remained to her. But in the fatal determination to wring from her opponent some admission of the rightness of her cause, and to taste uninterrupted the titbit of the last word, she persisted too long. Not she, but the maid's mother, brought the dispute eventually to an end and robbed her of a mistress's prerogative.

"That'll do!" said the girl's mother. "Let's hear no more about it. I haven't come here to waste my time listening to you. I've come to fetch my daughter, and I won't go back without her an' all. She shan't stop another minute in such a place. Where is she?

What have you done with her?" She even raised her voice and called upon the girl by name, in such a tone and with such utter disregard of the decencies as curdled Miss Parkworth's blood. For a moment Miss Parkworth stood speechless with indignation, like a shivering aspen rooted in its own soil, dreading lest the maid should actually yield obedience to so unauthorised a summons.

"How dare you!" she cried, when her self-possession returned. "How dare you raise your voice in my house! It is monstrous. I have never been so insulted in my life."

But the door remained closed, and Miss Parkworth swiftly crossed to it before any further damage should be done to her authority.

"Your daughter would not dream of answering such a call," she said. "She has some respect for herself and for me, if you have none. She does not forget what is due to a mistress of my standing." And she summoned the girl from the kitchen with her own lips.

"Here!" said the girl's mother the moment she caught sight of her, "get your things on at once and we'll be out of this. I've had as much of it as'll last me *my* time. I don't know how you've stopped so long. If I'd had any idea what place was like I'd never 'a brought you. Where's box? Let's be getting hold. The sooner we're gone the better I shall be pleased."

She took charge of the final operation without further regard to Miss Parkworth, who trembled passionately in an indignation devoid of voice or

vent, dispossessed of the last remnant of authority; an impotent spectator of activities in which she was allowed to have no part.

"Whereabouts is bedroom?" the girl's mother demanded, not of the mistress of the house—whom to the end she now ignored—but of her daughter.

"Up staircase? Come on wi' ye!" Miss Parkworth did not dare to follow; she did not dare to jeopardise her dignity by walking at the heels of such contemptuous independence. She got no farther than the staircase, at whose foot she stood with the graven immobility of a baluster, posturing an authority she lacked the power to voice. She dared not even impose caution upon the descending bearers of the box: "Be careful with the paint. Keep your feet off the varnish. Don't scrape that box-edge against the walls." She stood resentful and speechless, wrapped in her own heat like a radiator. And, curiously, her last remaining source of consolation was the girl. Girl and mother had completely changed their places in her smouldering opinion. By contrast with the flagrant rudeness of the latter the girl's fault seemed rendered venial, her behaviour almost exemplary. For even now, with the corruptive example of this parent to infect her, she retained her deferent shyness unimpaired. "Have you gotten paid?" the woman asked her in an ostentatious voice as they came down the last flight of stairs. "You have? Come on wi' ye, then. Nay, don't bother to look at *her*; you've finished wi' her. Look at me. Do you want to throw me down?"

Giving the breath of her resentment boisterous

outlet as she walked, to express the contempt that Miss Parkworth's silence gave her no excuse to utter by the spoken word, the woman dragged her daughter to the door through the medium of the corded box between them. As they paused upon the step the girl half-turned, as though with the timid consciousness of an obligation to be paid, and said " Good-bye'm " in a soft voice of trouble and regret that seemed to attest remorse for the impoliteness of her parent and the abrupt character of their leave. But Miss Parkworth took no notice of her. No, not the least notice. She did not deign to utter a word in reply. She double-locked her lips as if they had been doors. And the girl's skirt was barely clear of the passage before she shut the house door upon them both—shut it peremptorily, with all the contempt that can be expressed by the curt snapping of a sneck.

From her post behind the parlour curtains she watched them go, jostling the corded trunk between them, until the last vestige of their persons passed from sight. Externally she stood like stone, sculptured and immobile. Within, from head to foot, her indignation blazed with the fierceness of a bonfire, blown to every side by the gusts that swept it. What ! After all her goodness to this girl—her tenderness—her care, that had been well-nigh maternal—to treat her so ! To take this brutal leave of her ; to fling her kindness in her face ; to go without a word of thanks, without a single look or utterance of gratitude !

" Thank goodness ! " she exclaimed with a quivering mouth when the distant corner hid them. " They are gone ! I have seen the last of them. I could not

have borne myself much longer. No, I could not have borne myself another moment."

She drew back from the curtains with a gesture of triumphant despair and burst into tears.

Bitter, burning tears they were, that she made no effort to restrain, running like blood from a dozen—nay, a hundred—wounds. For not two tears confessed the same stab; each had its separate source. She wept for a multitude of reasons; she wept for every reason, and for none. She wept because they were gone, these two, and she was well rid of them, and could breathe free at last in her own house. She wept because they were no longer here, and triumph had been snatched from her by force and fraud. She wept because her bitterness had failed, and because it had succeeded all too well. She wept for the irretrievable lost chance to disclose the true tenderness that filled her. And, worst of all, she wept the bitterest cause that any human eye can weep—she wept her own folly. Yes, her own folly. She saw it now that this girl was gone, and solitude reclaimed possession of her once again. In exchange for the trumpery satisfaction of a little brief resentment she had flung away her happiness. For she might have been happy with this girl. She might, by the exercise of wise forbearance, have lived to taste that sweet domestic confidence for which she craved. Why, in the girl's company Miss Parkworth had almost regained her youth. She had regained youth's hopes and fears and burning curiosities; she had been, to all intents and purposes, a girl herself, tasting life's emotional intensities by proxy. Now, because of her insensate folly, she must be old again.

Once more must she stand behind her window, a forlorn bystander staring drearily at life through the curtain of her own uncertainties. Yes, the dream was ended. Herself had ended it. Tenderness, generosity, the warmth of sentiment, the softness of affection—these things were not for her. They were false, delusive bypaths, leading her ever back to the stony solitude she fled from.

And if we have tears over and to spare from our own necessities, let us weep for her too. Let us weep for all the Miss Parkworths of this world to whom life has denied the sunlight requisite to ripen the better self that is within them.

The Caretaker

THE Caretaker had not always been a Caretaker, any more than he had always had a wooden leg or beetle brows. In his early life, before he had learned the great lesson of taking care, he had been a platelayer on the Great Catch-'em-alive-O Line ; an unpromising-looking man on two legs, with a hard chin and an eye like a steel casting. Scarcely the sort of eye, one would say, to be taken unaware, but a strong ill-wind was blowing at the time, and Pht—before you could say Jack Robinson the Great Catch-'em-alive-O express had sliced off the Caretaker's leg.

The accident was unfortunate from every point of view. It robbed the Caretaker of his right leg when he could so much better have spared the left ; it drew an attention to the Caretaker's appearance which the appearance did little to repay ; and it happened on a disputed part of the line, where the Great Catch-'em-alive-O Line gets hopelessly intricated with half a dozen Great Something or Other Lines, in a maze of points, switches, junctions, and signal cabins—main lines and branch lines that puzzled the heads of all the departments when they came to try and disentangle them, a task from which they at once desisted when they perceived that it could only be decided by thinking. So, after taking dozens of depositions and photographs of the line, and diagrams of the working

section, and indexing them, and sealing them, and locking them up in a safe place where no gleam of human intelligence would ever be likely to light upon them, they one and all declared their satisfaction that the accident might have been avoided had the Caretaker taken reasonable care, and polished him off by presentation of a wooden leg.

The wooden leg was as fine a piece of seasoned timber as ever graced a dining-table; excellently turned, fitted with railway fastening-straps complete, and a little leather pad for the stump of the Caretaker's knee; but it came, like the accident, at an ill time, when the Caretaker chafed sore under his sense of injustice, and he never took to this step-leg as to the one that was gone before. From the first he set his face against it, and the step-leg though the most willing and inoffensive of its kind, could do nothing to appease him. He stumped on it rebelliously, pounding it with defiance upon the pavements, and, whether through some inexplicable relation or by mere coincidence, from the very day that they entered on their partnership of disagreement the Caretaker's brow began to beetle.

A house divided against itself was not more sadly at variance than this divided man. With his beetle brows curling their irate antennæ over his steel cast eyes—tempered now quite brittle in the fierce forge of injustice—and with his intractable step-leg, he was a man to be avoided by all who had a care for their toes.

But worse than the Caretaker's physical division was the moral discord introduced by this reluctant member. Had the accident only happened to the spiritual part of him, and the Great Catch-'em-alive-O

express had sliced off the Caretaker's temper, the loss might have been considered a gain to himself and to society. As it was, the leg stuck in his mind like a giant splinter, setting up a festering view of life that made the Caretaker's company less sought after than ever it had been since he possessed a vote. A strange conviction crept into his head, to the back of his beetle brows, that something ought to be done for him. Because he did not know, at one time, what on earth he was going to do for himself, he conceived this to be a sufficient reason why other people should set their wits to work and decide the question for him. Hitherto he had been a hard man, with no misconceptions as to the necessity for earning his own living, but now, with the strangest inconsistency, he came to regard himself as a constituted charge upon society, and could not see that if a two-legged man had no claim on his fellows a one-legged man had less. Always the burden of his injury was: "What's going to be done for *me*? How am *I* to be provided for?"

At the time of his accident the Caretaker had been keeping company with a demure domestic of sober years, with a view to matrimony so soon as she should have saved enough out of her earnings to make it worth his while—in which respect, we may perceive, the two-legged platelayer possessed all the essential elements of a caretaker already. The demure domestic of sober years was a most estimable woman, whom a life of self-sacrificing toil had neither hardened nor beautified. She had supported a drunken father through a prolonged terminative illness, and had gone into heartfelt mourning for him on his demise for

all the world as though she had lost a parent; she had been the mainstay of a large family of sisters, four of whom she had equipped for service with her own hands, and three of whom had not thanked her; and by her many qualities she had endeared herself to a maiden lady who was very good to the poor. This maiden lady lived in a spacious stone house set back from the roadway behind a line of chestnuts, spreading their branches over a stone wall, and she thought the world of the demure domestic who was going to marry the Caretaker as soon as her savings were sufficient to assure him a comfortable home.

It was therefore in the nature of a shock to her when the demure domestic came weeping distractedly into her presence one day and said:

"Oh, missus, what do you think I've heard? He's had his leg took off!"

The maiden lady had a nephew of whom she thought two worlds (being the one relative left to her), and her first thought flew to him. She went a deathly white and sat down on the nearest chair.

"Oh, surely, surely!" she said. "It cannot be true. It is much too terrible to be true."

Still weeping, though composedly, and not overlooking in her sorrow—as less experienced servants might have done—that due respect which had helped so largely to earn her mistress's esteem, Sarah unfolded her tale of the Caretaker's accident. The maiden lady (who shall blame her?), though visibly relieved to learn that her first fears were unfounded, and that the leg was no relation, was still deeply touched by a disaster involving one of whom she thought one world,

and tears of thankfulness and sympathy welled up into her eyes.

"You poor creature!" she cried. "I am truly sorry for you. After all the trouble you have had——" Here she brushed her tears away with a handkerchief and was significantly silent, for she had a deeply religious heart, and guarded always against saying anything derogatory of Providence.

"But now what do you want to do?" she enquired, putting away her weakness with her handkerchief, and looking affliction fearlessly in the face. "What do you think you *ought* to do? For what you think you ought to do you *shall* do, so far as I can help you."

The demure domestic, weeping respectful tears of gratitude, said she thought she felt a fancy to go and see him if her mistress could spare her. It might be for the last time. Somebody had heard from somebody else, whose father had helped to watch him lifted out of the ambulance, that he looked very white, and his eyes was shut.

"Waste no time, then," said the maiden lady, whose goodness to the poor had taught her to be practical, "but put on your things and go at once. And"—here she fumbled in her pocket once more and drew out a purse (despite the domestic's protesting: "Oh, missus, you shouldn't'm")—"that's for any little thing that may be wanted immediately, to help to make him comfortable and do him good. I do hope and pray he may be spared to you, Sarah."

The maiden lady's prayer was heard and granted. The Caretaker thrived on that, as also on the port wine, the beef tea, the calf's foot and isinglass jellies, the

chicken broth, the champagne, and the varied enticements to health with which the maiden lady supplied him, and rapidly gained strength for the formulation of his enquiry: "What's going to be done for *me*? How am *I* to be provided for?"

To this the demure domestic, who could see no purpose in life beyond the doing of things for others, and who worshipped the Caretaker for his infirmities of flesh and spirit with a devotion almost idolatrous, offered the one solution in her power. She begged him not to think of her, as though there had at any time been any fear of it, but to let them both get married without delay, so that she might do for him what she could, and provide for him to the best of her ability. Viewed in the light of her savings, it was but a poor reply to the Caretaker's enquiry, but she was a sanguine body, and the Caretaker was fast learning his rudiments. As he said, he saw no way out of it. Aye, it made a deal of difference to a man when he lost anythink belonging him.

So it was settled, and the demure domestic of sober years became almost giddy with joy at having acquired this damaged piece of mortality to slave for, and being able to take it into a home of her own providing, and call it husband. She went back to the large stone house on pathways of cloud, and told her mistress the glad tidings with a face transfigured.

The maiden lady was stirred in turn and visibly affected with the domestic's happiness, but a frail white finger sought her withered lip, and wandered over it like a dubious spirit.

"If it is your happiness, Sarah," she said in her

gentle, meditative tones, "it is my happiness, too. And I hope—and pray—it may prove the happiness of you both." She paused awhile, and the dubious finger moved a thought's breadth away from her lip.

"Are you—quite sure," she added, "that you are doing the wise thing? Marriage is a great—tie. A great tie." She sighed as she said it and looked sadly at the one finger of her white hand that had once in her life known the ecstasy of an engagement ring.

"True'm," assented the demure domestic. "But what would you have me do? We've kep' company now this six year or more, and with God's blessing we might 'a kep' it for another six to come. But 'E willed otherwise, and we must submit."

Her enthusiasm, rather than her argument, seemed to prevail over the frail finger at last, and the spirit of dubiety was laid with just a tremor of reluctance in the maiden lady's lap.

"You are a good, true creature," she said at length, "and we must try and make you happy if we can."

The maiden lady was very good to poor people, and she took the whole of the demure domestic's plans under her personal care. Day by day she conferred with the demure domestic as to the progress of affairs. In a way this marriage became her own, and few could have believed with what anxiety she followed the fate of these two, or how deeply her own feelings were involved in it.

"And who knows," she suggested hopefully to the demure domestic at one of their conferences, "perhaps, some day, you may have a family of your own, Sarah."

"Lor', mum!" said the domestic, reddening. "I'm sure I never gave it a thought. An' him so afflicted."

"True, true," agreed the maiden lady. "That is a matter for higher hands than ours. But a family, despite the anxiety attending its care and bringing up, has its compensations, Sarah."

"And I'm not denying it, mum," said the demure domestic heartfully. "I've always been fond o' childer all my life, and I don't know as I should be anyways against 'aving one or two of my own—if it pleased the Lord to send them, and they was to come after a while, when we'd had chance to look round us a bit, and Reuben felt more settled with 'is new leg, and could get about nicely."

And every day the maiden lady demanded of her trusted servant what new presents she had received, and the answer did not vary after the first. One of the three sisters wrote to say it was a pity she couldn't find somebody better to marry while she was about it, which made the demure domestic very red-eyed for a long time after she had burned the letter. The fourth sister sent her a velvet thimble-case and a pair of scissors, and a long letter in which she "hopped" that Sarah would be "hapy," and the demure domestic went red-eyed after that letter too, so that kindness and ingratitude would appear to work out pretty much to the same thing in practice.

"And you will want a wringing machine," said the maiden lady, after a night's reflection. "Do you think that anybody is likely to make you a present of a wringing machine, Sarah?"

"Lor', mum!" said Sarah, aghast at the mere suggestion. "I only wish they might. But that'll come in good time, when we've 'ad the chance to look round us a bit, an' Reuben's gettin' settled with his leg."

"Oh, nonsense!" said the maiden lady with decision. "How could you ever hope to get a chance of looking round you without a wringing machine! Now that's going to be *my* present, Sarah."

And every present required to complete the prospective house became, in turn, her present. The only thing detracting in the least from the maiden lady's happiness or confidence was the one-legged Caretaker himself.

Almost his first eventful journey on the step-leg was to the spacious stone house, ostensibly to thank the maiden lady (at Sarah's instigation) for all her kindness; but he had never, strictly speaking, been a thankful man, and the sense of injury was still so hot within him that for all the world, as he rose to his one foot and his one iron stump on the kitchen floor when the maiden lady entered, he looked like the incarnation of a thunderstorm. The maiden lady greeted him graciously, but with the white finger wandering in gentle uncertainty about her lip, and said she was glad to see him so far recovered, and enquired how he found himself. He thanked her and found himself but middling. But middling. It made a deal of difference, now, when a man lost anythink belonging him.

"To be sure, to be sure!" said the maiden lady sympathetically, and the frail finger left her lip when sympathy came on to it.

" Such a active man as he's been'm, too," explained the demure domestic. " Of course, he feels it now'm—it's only like he will do for a bit—but it'll be all right after awhile ; after he gets used to things. An' that's the leg'm ! " she said, drawing her mistress's attention to it with a sudden burst of pride.

" So that's the leg," echoed the maiden lady dubiously. " Sit down again, Reuben, I beg." The Caretaker sat down and the step-leg sprang up defiantly at its benefactress.

" I'm sure it's a beauty'm," said Sarah. " Just feel how solid it is'm."

The maiden lady, after a moment's hesitation, touched it modestly with her finger.

" Beautifully solid," she said, withdrawing the finger quickly, under cover of admiration. " Such a strong, firm leg. That's not likely to let you down, Reuben ! "

" What a calf it's got'm ! " said Sarah rapturously.

" It's very 'eavy to lift," said the Caretaker.

" Why, I expect he's not got used to it'm," the demure domestic suggested. " But it'll come lighter after awhile."

" When he gets stronger, too," said the maiden lady.

" Very 'eavy to lift, it is," repeated the Caretaker, fixing alternate speakers with his steely eye. " I wish them 'at made it 'ad it to wear."

" If it wasn't so heavy p'raps it wouldn't be so safe," said Sarah. " An' I'm sure we don't want anything happening him a second time—do we'm ? "

The maiden lady uttered a heartfelt " No, indeed ! "

and bade the Caretaker remain seated when she took her leave of him. And when the Caretaker had churned holes down the gravel drive on his way homeward—to correspond with those he had churned on his way up—filled with raisin cake and wine, and the spirit of injury and injustice, she asked the demure domestic, after much deep pondering, if she were quite sure—quite, quite sure now——

"Lor'm!" said Sarah, whose whole being, flooded with sanguine sunlight, never harboured a cloud. "How doubtful you must think me, I declare!"

"I only want you to be happy, Sarah," the maiden lady decided.

"Why, mum," the domestic assured her, "I'm as happy as can be. I do believe it's the leg that's done it. It fair seems to have caught my fancy."

And so the demure domestic married the one-legged Caretaker and settled down in the house that the maiden lady had chosen for her, and began to look round her as she had devised. With the remnant of her savings, and occasional assistance from the maiden lady (though not too much of this, for the maiden lady, now that the domestic was established, did not wish to make a pauper of her), and her needle and her wringing machine, she set to work to support the wooden leg. But the Caretaker was right. The leg was very heavy—very heavy, it was, to lift. And, despite her sanguine predictions and her cheerful faith, it grew no lighter as time wore on. It was, according to the Caretaker's showing, an intractable, refractory, contrairy, contumacious, and good-for-nothing leg, that took pleasure in thwarting him in

all his good intentions, and would be, in his own phraseology, " the death of him yet." A job was found for it as gate-opener at a remote level crossing of the Great Catch-'em-alive-O Line, but the leg got across the authorities, somehow, and was superseded by twin gate-openers of flesh and blood, and the Caretaker stumped home, smoking with injury and injustice, and cried :

" *Now* what's going to be done for me ? How am *I* going to be provided for now ? "

And his wife shed tears of thankfulness, dear sanguine soul, that the job had been taken from him before it could end by taking him from her.

" You was never away by them lines," she said, " but what my heart was in my mouth all the time, dreading what might happen you. I'm deep and truly thankful you'll never go near them lines no more, for oftens when a knock has come at the door I've sat down, all of a tremble, and said to myself : ' There goes somethink else belonging him.' "

Other jobs were found for the leg in turn—lighter jobs, and still lighter as time went on—but the leg was incorrigible, it seemed, and the lighter were the jobs provided the heavier it grew. There was scarcely any lifting it in the end. The maiden lady called from time to time and looked at it in its established place in the kitchen fender, and from that her eyes strayed to the demure domestic ; but the demure domestic, though perhaps thinner and more careworn, was as sanguine as ever, and banished her old mistress's perplexity with all her familiar rosy predictions. The leg hadn't had a chance, the leg hadn't ; but as

soon as they'd had time to get a bit more settled and look round she knew things would alter.

Yet, though the demure domestic looked round for all she was worth, and things undoubtedly altered, they did not alter for the better. The leg grew daily heavier, and took more supporting. And since Time is ever a double-handed giver, there was change for the maiden lady too. Her nephew developed serious lung trouble during a visit to the spacious stone house, and lay perilously prostrate on the line of life while Death's great Catch-'em-alive-O express sped by. It missed him by a hairsbreadth, but it left him in such a precarious situation that the next express, so the doctors said, must inevitably cut him off for good. There was only one hope—a sea voyage and a change of climate. So Time, the carpenter, using trouble as his tool, worked the dovetail in these two destinies and made them ready to combine. The last attempt of the demure domestic to look round, this time in the direction of the greengrocery line, had met with failure. The few wilted greens and flabby cabbages, after having flagged beneath the sun's hot sarcasm in the parlour window, were all absorbed for support and sustenance of the wooden leg—that seemed to require more nourishment than its living predecessor—and the farewell look round had been given, preparatory to departure, when the maiden lady (herself more fragile under trouble) came, as the good fairy she was, to effect the transformation. She was on the very eve of a voyage with her nephew, but there were the cats to think of, and the canary, and this and that about the house

to look after and keep in order. There was nobody she could trust in the world like Sarah and her dear husband, and she came to ask if they would take up their quarters in the stone house, and keep it in order until her return.

"Then indeed I shall feel," she said, "that things are as I should wish them. Wherever I may be, and whatever Providence may have in store for me, I shall always be comforted to know that my home is still my home, and that loving hands are cherishing it and tending it for my return. For homes, to my mind, are very like ourselves, Sarah; giving back love and brightness where love and brightness are given; and, indeed, I could as soon bear to leave my dumb pets starving as my dear home—from which I have derived so many hours of consolation and so much happiness—uncared for. You will? You dear creatures, both. God bless you. I felt sure you would."

She departed on her voyage of love and self-sacrifice, and the demure domestic and her husband took possession of the spacious stone house; the one with tears of thankfulness and gratitude, the other with a smouldering bosom of injury; cracking the kitchen floor-tiles with his wrathful iron stump, and looking angrily round, as though for some legible indication of what was going to be done for him.

"See what some folks gets done for 'em!" he cried irefully. "Gets took away with every comfort to enjoy theirselves in furrin parts—folks that's never lost anythink belongin' 'em in their lives. Aye, but what's being done for *me*, I'd like to know? How am *I* going to be provided for?"

His wife turned upon him with swift appeal.

"Oh, hush, hush, hush," she said. "So good as she's been to us. If anybody was to hear you now, they might think you meant what you was saying!"

"An' what *do* I mean?" he demanded rebelliously.

"Not *that*, I'm very sure," his wife responded. "You don't mean anythink ungrateful, only that you're a bit downhearted to think you can't give me a home of our own. But don't you fret about that, Reuben, for it's not your fault, and well everybody knows it. Besides, what home could be happier to me than this, that's been a home to me since I can't tell the day when?"

"Aye!" cried the Caretaker. "But 'ow much longer is it to be a 'ome to us? Let 'im get better, and 'er come back, an' *then* where are we?" And he pounded the kitchen floor-tiles beneath his iron hoof of injury. "Aye, it was all right when I 'ad both my legs," he declared. "But it's been all wrong ever since they fastened this blasted clothes-prop on me. That's what done it all." He smote it fiercely on the floor. "This blasted leg what done it all, an' it'll be the death of me yet."

His wife shook her head and bit her lip sorrowfully

"Poor man, poor man," she said to herself. "How 'e does take it to heart, to be sure. Can't bear to think of hisself being that 'elpless, when he feels he ought to be doing somethink towards the 'ouse, and keeping me —that asks no better than health and strength to keep *'im*, poor creatur."

And she was more rosily prophetic than ever, and made believe that now they were turned round in

earnest, and the day of their deliverance was at hand.

So firm was her faith in the establishment of their fortune, and so strongly did she believe that the days of looking round had given place to a domestic millennium, that her spirit, as though now held to earth by no bondage of anxiety, sped upward with surprising suddenness one day to the blue surface of the great sea of heaven, like a bubble released from the dark ooze of deep waters. True, at odd moments latterly she had spoken of certain pains that seemed to catch her "here"—though where "here" was the Caretaker did not know, since he never looked to see. At odd moments, too, she had sat down and rocked to and fro with her fingers spread over her apron band, but nobody could have predicted from the look of this sanguine woman how near she stood to the next world—least of all the Caretaker, who looked at her as little as need be. She had unbuckled one strap of the fateful leg, and was at work upon the other, so that the Caretaker might rest more easily in his easy chair, when the room grew dark of a sudden and her ears were filled with the roar of death's thunderous express. It was the end. She sank upon a chair and died so quickly that the Caretaker had not time to ask her what was going to be done for him now, and how he was going to be provided for, before she went. But he asked it of the doctor, and of the undertaker, and of the undertaker's man, and of the registrar of births and deaths, and of everybody with whom his wife's death or his own disposition brought him in contact, and one and all gave him the same reply—they didn't know. The

doctor was sorry he didn't know ; the undertaker was sure he didn't know ; the undertaker's man was —— he didn't know ; the registrar—really, he didn't know. They all said they were something, and didn't know.

" Why, then *I'm* somethink ! " cried the Caretaker vehemently. " Nobody don't somethink well know, and *I* don't somethink well know."

And no man who ever knew less on the subject, or said more, ever attended a funeral.

He returned from what to many men would have been a melancholy rite, but to him was only an unpleasant duty, to the stone house that had been a home to his late wife ever since she couldn't tell the day when, and nursed his jaw as though it were an infant injury.

" Just when things was beginnin' to look a bit settled," he said, though it was the first time he had admitted as much. " I shall 'ave to write to 'er now, I suppose "—by which he meant the maiden lady— " an' see if *she* can tell what's goin' to be done for me. As like as not she'll say *she* don't know, and *then* what ! What's to be done then ? "

But the maiden lady had a very different reply to the question—a reply that would have touched the heart of any mortal less afflicted than the Caretaker.

" What a grievous letter I have received from you, poor dear Reuben," she wrote, on paper mottled in more than one place with her tears, " and what a terrible affliction has the Almighty just laid upon you."

" Aye, that 'E has ! " concurred the Caretaker darkly. " As true a word as ever was spoke. As though one trouble wasn't plenty for a man but 'E must give 'im

another. For all the world as if 'E'd took a grudge again' me."

"Upon us both, I might say——" the letter continued.

"What!" cried the Caretaker. "Both? 'Ow does she make that out?"

"Upon us both, I might say," he read again. "For you are, believe me, dear Reuben, not left alone in your sorrow. If you have to mourn the loss of a good, true, faithful, unselfish, loving, and lovable wife, who was devoted to you as you were devoted to her, I have also to mourn the loss of a good, true, faithful——"

"Aye, but where do *I* come in?" demanded the Caretaker. And he turned over that page.

"You will be sorry to learn——" he read a little farther on, and his brow beetled.

"Aye! Now we come to it!" he cried ominously. "'Sorry to learn!' Ah! That's me, right enough. Sorrer an' misery ever since I lost what belonged me."

"Sorry to learn," he read, when he bent his beetle brows once more upon the page, "that my dear nephew——"

"Blame your dear nephew!" he exclaimed with anger. "'E never did nothink for me. Why should a man that gets nothink done for 'im be sorry for one that they can't do enough for?" And he turned that page, too, for the maiden lady had written in the fullness of her heart, and it was a long letter.

But towards the end she gave him the reply for which he was so eager. As Sarah's dear husband she begged him to remain in the home so closely associated

with all three, until such time as Providence should sanction her return. In many simple but touching words she transferred the sacred charge of her birds, of her dear dumb pets, and of her beloved home into his keeping ; besought him to write her little assurances of their welfare from time to time, and subscribed herself, in conclusion, his very sincere, faithful, and deeply sympathetic friend.

One might have thought that a tear would not have been too much of an acknowledgment for so much love and generosity. But no. The eternal question filled the Caretaker's bosom to the exclusion of all else. He stamped his wooden step-leg on the hearth vehemently and cried : " There ! Blamed if I didn't think so ! What's that for a answer ? I'm to stop in this blamed 'ouse, and look after her blamed dumb pets—that gets everythink done for *them*—an' keep her blamed place clean an' comfortable for 'er while she comes back, an' then what's goin' to be done for me ? In she comes and out I goes, an' God bless you, you poor dear creatur ! "

No man ever harbours injury for long as his guest without the desire to pass him on and make somebody else contribute towards his maintenance and support. The Caretaker passed him on to the house, and the house—so very like ourselves, Sarah ; giving back love and brightness where love and brightness are given—grew cold and loveless under the Caretaker's neglect. Accustomed so long to the gentle treatment of foolish women—for the maiden lady's mother had lived in it and loved it years before—to hands that touched it softly, and feet that were ever thoughtful of its carpets,

it held its breath and drew back in a chill of apprehension at sound of the irate step-leg. The rooms that the Caretaker looked into with his steel eyeballs might have been dead for all the sign that they gave in answer to his beetling scrutiny—rooms that would have wakened in a little stir of recognition to welcome the entry of their beloved mistress.

The weeks sped on, stumped over by the wooden leg, as though its stump, stump, stump were the inexorable ticking of the clock of Destiny. Here was your true heaven-born Caretaker, and no mistake. Dust the stairs? Not him! Why should he take upon himself his dead wife's duties and look after her business for them as was distant and wouldn't thank him? Scrub the floors? Aye, that was a likely thing to do now, wasn't it, for a man in his situation, that ought to have had somethink done for him long ago? Clean the windows? To be sure. They'd catch him doing that, they would. He'd watch it. His chief occupation was to sit with his wooden leg in the kitchen fender, so morosely close to the fire that you could smell it burning, and cook his victuals and eat them, and brood diurnally over his injuries.

Thus it is not difficult to understand that the maiden lady's dear dumb pets received a liberal portion of the transferred neglect. Nothing had been done for the Caretaker; the Caretaker did nothing for them. After a week of the wooden-legged tyranny the cats departed, perhaps to die, perhaps to enter on a life of infamy afar. Alive or dead, what odds to the Caretaker, afflicted as he was?

And one morning, stumping into the drawing-room

—though for what fell purpose heaven knows—he found with some surprise that there lay a dead bird at the bottom of a seedless and waterless cage.

Since we must confess the truth, this last loss, though it cost the Caretaker incomparably less trouble than the loss of his leg, cost him considerably more than the loss of his wife, for there had been no awkward questions involved in her defunction. Through his wiry eyebrows, and through the less hard and less wiry bars of the gilded cage, he stood and beetled at the dead bird; and for the first time in many months his look showed not so much of injury as disquietude.

"Blow me!" he exclaimed, after some moments of metallic contemplation. "'Ere's a nice thing to find, as if I 'adn't troubles enough o' my own." He poked a horny finger at the bird through the bars, and shook the suspended cage with both hands. "Aye! Dead enough!" he decided, as he watched the rigid body roll. "Dead as a nit—that's 'ad everythink done for it, an' a life o' comfort an' luxury. I wish as much 'ad been done for *me*, that's all." He opened the cage door and drew the dead pet from its cold home in a callous and not too cleanly hand. "Now *she*'ll want to know about this here, and then what shall I 'ave to say? As like as not she'll try an' make out I ought to 'a looked after it better. Aye! As like as not she will. Do all you can an' you can't please 'em."

And he flung the bird, unshrouded and unmourned, into the ashpit, where—who knows?—it might serve to bring back some stray momentary remembrance of the old home's happiness to one or other of the wandering cats. The Caretaker was right in his

estimate of the maiden lady's anxiety. After two of his letters had gone forth from under the heavy hand, void of all reference to her dear dumb pets, she ventured a gentle appeal in her reply.

" You do not make any allusion," she wrote " to my dear dumb family, so very constantly in my thoughts for all I am far away. The home will seem strange to them, poor things, now that I am gone ; but I know you will look after them, Reuben, and take dear Sarah's place, and my own place, in their affections. Writing comes as a task to most of us at times, but if you could in your next letter reassure me as to their safety and happiness (though, indeed, I need little assurance as to the latter) I should be very grateful and obliged."

" There ! " cried the Caretaker with grim triumph when he read these words. " What did I say ! She's got it into 'er 'ead, an' she'll stick to it. Aye. A deal more she thinks about a pack o' useless varmints than she thinks about me, with all I've gone through."

And a third thin letter went forth from the heavy hand, void of reference to the dear, very dumb, and very much departed pets.

" But she'll 'ave somethink to say ! " he predicted wrathfully.

And he was right. Her next letter was plainly apprehensive and solicitous.

" I fear," she wrote, breaking into the matter nearest her heart almost at the outset, " that your kind thought is striving to keep back some sad news from me concerning my dear pets. But I beseech you, if

Providence has seen fit to bereave me of anything else I love, or is in any way dear to me, that you will not hesitate to tell me the whole truth. In a measure I am prepared for the worst, and it would only be mistaken kindness (though very loving and well-meaning kindness, I know) on your part, dear Reuben, to keep me longer in ignorance and apprehension."

This time the Caretaker gave her the reply so eagerly besought. The cats was both very well up to the present, he was glad to say, and had their milk regular, but he'd been told there was a deal of poison laid about in places now, and, do what he would, he couldn't keep them by his side as much as he wished. As for the canary—— As for the canary, now, since she'd begged him to keep nothink back from her, he must tell her that it never seemed to do no good since her that was dear to them both had been took away. Never sung no more since he come home from laying her to rest. He filled it' little trough with nice clean water, and give it some nice fresh seed, but next morning, when he come first thing to see how it was going on, it' little spirit had passed away.

" Spirit had passed away," scrawled the suffering pen-nib, ground on to the paper by the heavy hand, and beetled over by the wiry brows. " Had passed away. Passed away."

" An' will *that* satisfy 'er ? " cried the Caretaker, when his ghastly parody was done. " Lord bless me, but some folks takes some pleasin' when they've 'ad everythink done for 'em. 'Ere, does she think I 'aven't work enough to do without I must sit down and write about birds an' cats an' such-like rubbish—

good shutness to 'em—afflicted as I am? An' *this* won't settle it, blame 'er."

Nor did it. By the first possible post she wrote again. A more discerning critic than the Caretaker might have perceived a certain wearied tremor about the writing, shaking under the sentiments it expressed, as though the maiden lady's both soul and body had felt this latter blow. The Caretaker's bad tidings had touched her, she said, more deeply than she could express; more deeply than she thought she could have been touched. All her home, all that life had made dear to her or given her to love, seemed as though it were being slowly drawn back into the bosom of the Great Giver. At times she wondered whether this slow reclamation of these worldly things were but a merciful preparation for her own withdrawal; whether by removal of all that her heart held dearest in this world, Providence might not be reconciling her to a departure for the next, where she should find so many loved ones awaiting her. Much more gentle resignation to the will of heaven did her letter hold—more, indeed, than the Caretaker's patience could sustain at one sitting. She recalled his wife's unflagging love and devotion; she prayed that her two dear cats might (with the Caretaker's valued help) escape the poison laid down by heartless and thoughtless people—people who had never earned, and who were incapable of appreciating, the true and faithful love of dumb animals, as she and the Caretaker and his dear wife (when living) had done. She made enquiries about the house—how this was looking and that was looking. "My home still, Reuben. My dear home still,

ever in my thoughts and prayers until it please God Almighty to call me to His home, where His hand will sustain me, His hand wipe away all my tears. Where all that I have ever loved will be, never more to be taken from me, and where may you, too, dear friend, be one day, no longer wearing God's heavy burden, laid on you for His all-wise purpose, but spiritually perfect, and knowing His great love." In conclusion she begged the Caretaker not to work too hard, as she was afraid he might, but to benefit by the present opportunity to rest and gain strength for the future.

"Aye! Now we come to it!" said the Caretaker. "The future. There it is in black an' white. Let 'er come back an' out I go. That's the future for you."

And she prayed God to repay him for all his devotion to his dear wife, to her own dumb pets, and to herself.

"An' 'E'll do it!" cried the wooden-legged man impatiently. "Ah! There you are. Let 'er come back an' out I go, an' God repay you for all you've done, you poor dear creatur, for I can't an' won't, an' so you know!"

Good! He sees where he stands now, and won't trouble nobody no further. Since nobody does nothink for him, or tells him how he's going to be provided for, he'll do it for himself and be beholden to nobody.

First of all, therefore, doing everything for himself is synonymous with doing nothing for nobody. It would be a queer philosophy indeed which should

instruct its disciples to do for those that never did for them. A queer philosophy indeed. And why should he do anything for the maiden lady, that did nothing for him in return? Why, indeed? For no reason. He shouldn't. And didn't.

All that the Caretaker didn't do for them that didn't thank him was done in the kitchen. He cooked and he chomped, and he chomped and he cooked, and he sat with his leg in the fender, close to the fire that he kept always burning—as one of the things being done for himself—and morning, noon, and night he read the evening paper.

Hitherto, during his later and less agreeable years, the Caretaker had ranked as a teetotaller, and had indeed worn the blue ribbon on his coat collar where influential teetotallers would be most likely to see it. But what had teetotalism done for him, all afflicted as he was? Nothing beyond using him as an example to others, as a man who had sustained himself and a heavy wooden leg without the cursed help of stimulants. Good. He saw where he was standing now. Teetotalism had done nothink for him. Blame him if he'd do anythink for teetotalism. Why should he forgo the few comforts within his power when other people had everythink done for them? So the pledge was broken, though the soiled blue ribbon still remained to be interpreted as influential teetotallers and the world at large willed best. He discovered in this new-found fiery, morose, and meditative friend the very companion for whom his injured soul had been unconsciously seeking all these injured years. Here was company at last. Here was company indeed.

Quite retail, by sixpennyworths at a time, the Caretaker purchased the society of this new friend, and conducted him back to the kitchen that had been like home to his late wife ever since she couldn't tell the day when, in a little flat bottle that slipped nicely into his coat pocket and lay snug to the hard bosom that it was going to warm. Sixpennyworth of friendship at first, and then—for friendship grows and will not be denied—a shillingsworth ; and after that as much as two and as much as three shillingsworth of good-fellowship at one time, in a big round bottle that the Caretaker took out cautiously wrapped up in an overcoat of the *Evening News*.

Think of it ! Three shillingsworth of pure friendship at a time ; friendship proof against all the revenue of gaugers that ever lived ; more friendship in that one long bottle, wrapped up in that thin evening newspaper, than ever he had obtained of his wife in all their married years. Here was a friend who knew what it was to have lost anythink belonging you ; here was a friend that said : " Why ! sittiwated as you are, afflicted as you're afflicted, an' tried as you've been tried, an' workin' as you've worked, there's nothink that folks could have done too much for."

Said it with tears in his eyes, and a catch of sympathy in his voice that made the Caretaker weep like a child.

Yes, made the Caretaker weep ! Weep real, rolling tears out of those steel-cast eyes, and sob with his chin in the coat-sleeves thrown upon the table at this first touch of true, living, and deep-felt sympathy that life had offered him. Ah, if only his wife had treated him

like that, if only the maiden lady had treated him like that, what a different man he might have been.

"I've never 'ad a friend to say a good word for me," he wept one evening, "or try an' get anythink done for me. All my life I've 'ad to work. Aye, harder than my strength would bear at times, when I 'ad 'er to keep an' look after. An' I'm nearly fifty-three—nearly fifty-three!" He sobbed at that. "Fifty-three an' nothink done for me."

"It's cruel 'ard," his weeping friend took up. "Such a honest an' a active an' a upright man as you've been, an' so good to them about you."

"Aye. Cruel 'ard!" sobbed the Caretaker, and with his forehead upon his limp arms he sobbed himself at last into a deep and heavy slumber.

It was late morning when he woke up; the fire was out of the grate, and his dearest friend was out of the bottle. Not a drop of him left, though the Caretaker held the long neck inverted for full three minutes, and watched for stray trickles with a thirsty eye. Everything was cold and lost and gloomy; his eyeballs ached, and most of all did he miss his friend. The only friend in the world, albeit a friend of fixed principles, who associated freely with honest cash, but rigidly withheld his friendship from deserving credit. And the latter was all that the Caretaker possessed at present—all that he would possess until the end of the week, when he went to draw the maiden lady's money (blame her!) in return for hard services rendered.

The thought of an evening's solitude, as the hours limped by, drove him almost to desperation. Over and over again did he enfold the empty bottle in its

last night's thin mantle, thrust it under his coat and stand, beetling through his brows at the door, as though bracing himself for a supreme effort. And as many times as he had done this did he withdraw the swathed bottle once more with a gesture of angry despair, and set it mistily upon the table, and say :

" It's no use. They wouldn't let me 'ave it, for all I've gone through. The world's again' me, that's what it is."

But as time crept on and the clock hands began to point significantly towards evening a new look came into office behind his beetle brows, and his leg began to stump, as though churning ideas into the stiff cheese of action. Long he stumped from the kitchen to the passages, and from the passages to the hall, and in and out of the lower rooms of the maiden lady's dear home—so long, indeed, that he was still in motion when a late October dusk enveloped the house. But though the churning never seemed to stop it must have done its work, for he picked up the swathed bottle in the end with a decision lacking before, and departed in the deepening gloom of night. When at last the Caretaker came back he was not unaccompanied. Three shillingsworth of his dearest friend came with him, and this night ended as had done the last—as all nights were destined now to do. For they were inseparable, these friends. Their friendship passed into a proverb. The fat man behind the long counter where the dear friend lived was wont to laugh through sheer exuberance when he saw the Caretaker come in, hugging the bottle to his heart.

" Why ! Here's our teetotaller again ! " he used

to cry, for the bit of blue and very greasy ribbon still showed faintly on the Caretaker's coat. "As punctual as the clock. What's it to be this time, old water-drinker? The same?"

"Aye, the same," said the Caretaker hurriedly. "The same as before." Always the same. For to change such a tried and trusted friend for any other would have been unthinkable. The friendship between them grew, indeed, until the Caretaker had to provide a second bottle for its accommodation. No friend was ever better thought of in this world. Nor did money—so often a cause of severance to other friendships—offer the slightest obstacle to theirs. It seemed as though the Caretaker's friend had taken the matter in hand and done something for him, and looked to it that he was comfortably provided for at last.

Alas! that such a sacred thing as friendship should be subject to the iron laws of mutability and change. Could not Fate have left the ill-used Caretaker to the consolations of this one true friend? It seems not, since Fate knocked one day at the door of his sanctuary with a rude and violent hand, and dropped a thunderbolt into the letter-box in the form of a letter from the maiden lady.

In the engrossing course of fellowship the Caretaker had almost arrived at the welcome stage of forgetting this dark menace to his happiness, and he beetled ominously as his hand picked up the missive.

"Blame 'er!" he exclaimed, when the steel eyes corroborated his worst fears. "If I didn't think so. She's wrote again. Can't let me alone. What's she wantin' now, I wonder?"

Time had wrought changes in them both, it seemed ; for the Caretaker's voice, though it retained some faint characteristics of its old manner, was weak and broken ; fretful rather than passionate ; a querulous echo of the voice in its best days. And the maiden lady's writing was but a shaken shadow of her ancient penmanship ; her words but a collection of faded, disconnected letters, all fallen to pieces and expressive of decay. She wrote on black-edged paper that made the writing look pallid by comparison, and her words were sadly few. All was over. Her nephew was dead and buried in a far-off resting-place, and she herself was coming home, to spend her short remaining time amid the things she loved, in preparation for her own departure. She charged Reuben to get all ready for her coming, albeit she would write a letter of more definite instructions the moment she arrived in England, and she remained his feeble, broken, but very loving friend.

To say that the Caretaker was moved is only half the truth. The letter so deeply stirred him that his face grew ashen, and he trembled till the sheet of black-edged paper shook between his fingers as if a ghostly wind were playing on it. As soon as his ill-assorted legs had recovered sufficiently for service he stumped feebly back to his friend and burst into tears.

" See 'ere what's 'appened me ! " he whimpered. " Everythink's again' me. She's comin' back. An' what'll be done at me then ? Fifty-three I am, an' goin' on fifty-four. What'll be done at me then ? "

In his broken grief it seemed as though the old and

ireful Caretaker were long since dead, and this enfeebled fellow but the ghost of him that flitted now about its earthly tenement. Even the old formula of his injury, for some inexplicable reason, was forgotten. He asked no longer what was going to be done for him—as though, poor man, his years of trouble had laid bare the dry bones of hopelessness concealed beneath the question—but what was going to be done *at* him—a change of phrase inferring that his faith in human nature was utterly destroyed, and that he could only fear fresh injuries from a world which had bestowed on him so little else before. All that day he kept close to his friend by the kitchen table, recounting his hard lot, and they mingled their tears together. Whether his friend grew weary of the Caretaker's reiterations at the end, or whether he felt lonely when the Caretaker fell asleep, were hard to tell, but when the Caretaker at length awoke the kitchen was grey and dismal, and his dear friend had gone home again. Utterly home again. Not a drop of him remained.

Snivelling under this desertion, the Caretaker rose to his unsteady foot and stump and tried the bottles by the test of his peering eye.

"Must 'ave my bit o' comfort!" he whimpered, when he saw how truly left he was. "My bit o' comfort that I've slaved an' worked for. Fifty-three, an' goin' on fifty-four. Aye, it's cruel 'ard. It's cruel 'ard. But I can't do without my comfort now."

He made as though to take one of the bottles under his arm, then stopped and set it back upon the table and went through his pockets carefully instead. They yielded very little indeed—at most but a copper or

two. The discovery struck a cry of despair to his lips as though it were a feared lash that had fallen.

"Blame 'er!" he snarled, in a voice husky between defiance and despair. "She drives me to it. She's as good as begged me."

He stumped away in the gathering gloom as he had stumped away on so many nights before; stumped here and stumped there about the house in restless circulation, and came back to the kitchen at length with his purpose materialised beneath a shroud of evening paper. It was a bulky purpose, this time, so big and stimulating that it lent him confidence to take up the bottle without hesitation, and hugging this to him on one side, and hugging his purpose on the other, he set off down the drive to seek his dear friend of the name of Comforts. But first, choosing many dark ways where dark ways were to be taken, and long attenuated passages where these were to be had in preference to lighted thoroughfares, he came to a shop over whose dim door dangled in the dusk three dim, depressing, and deadly-looking balls, like the trophies of a siege. After all his stumping and solid purpose it was strange to find him showing signs of hesitation here, but so he did, and for a whole minute watched the spheres so dubiously that at last his apprehension seemed to vitalise them into motion. For a time one might have thought he was afraid of them, but, urged on doubtless by remembrance of his dear friend Comforts, he braved what fears he had and let himself through the dim door into the small shop beyond, dim with yellow lamplight, reeking of paraffin, and heavy with the questionable odour of

piled garments, boots, shoes, skirts, and shabby wearing apparel of both sexes. Here, at the ringing of a tuneless bell, that hiccuped bronchially behind the door when he entered, and continued in a paroxysm of coughing for some minutes afterwards, he was met by a man of peering aspect, who seemed as though his business had taught him to scrutinise all people closely, and his recognition of the Caretaker was not succeeded by excessive cordiality. Perhaps the Caretaker felt the chill of his reception. Perhaps, after all the affection to which his dear friend Comforts had accustomed him, he flinched beneath a look so worldly and so chill. At all events he was distinctly apologetic in his bearing, and began to produce his purpose nervously from under his arm, with deference for a connoisseur of such things and for a man entitled to respect.

His purpose stood revealed at length upon the dirty counter—a marble timepiece that the Connoisseur looked at as he had looked at the Caretaker and at the Caretaker's fumbling fingers, without appreciation and without a word.

"A little matter——" the Caretaker explained uneasily, folding up the newspaper as a means for avoiding too much contact with the peering eye. "Times is that bad, I do declare. A nice clock it is. A very nice clock—and as good a timekeeper as you might wish for. Keeps time to a minute. But I'm like to leave it with you. Like to leave it with you, I am."

He had folded up his newspaper at length, and had now no further excuse to avoid the peering eye. It was where he had last seen it—upon himself; and a

silent pause ensued in which his own eyes, once of steel and the match for any other eyes of earth, dropped uneasily.

"Aye!" said the Connoisseur, speaking at last in a slow, hard voice, with no soul in it, but a great amount of meaning, and still looking at the Caretaker. "You've been here a goodish few times of late. A goodish few times, you have. And you've brought a goodish few things with you. And what's more, I've paid you a goodish bit of money for 'em in my day."

"Not more than they was worth," the Caretaker sniffed in pitiful defence. "You can't say that."

"P'raps I can't," the Connoisseur assented. "But what I do say, and what I mean to say, is this: Have I been playing the fool to give you anything at all? The Law's no friend to such as me, that's called upon to be a friend to everybody, and you know what the Law says, and how it stands. I give you somethink on a few knives. Good. That's fair enough. I give you somethink on a few table-cloths. Good. *That's* fair enough. But when we come to Dresden chiny, and silver fortygraft frames, and inlaid workboxes, and marble clocks, the Law says: 'Stop a bit. Whose are they? And where do they come from?' That's what the Law says, and that's what I say. Suppose you give me an answer now, before we go no further."

The Caretaker's lip trembled. Oh! how it missed the support of its dear friend Comforts. Oh! if Comforts had only been here! And his cheek turned to an unpleasant mottled grey.

"Do you mean to say," he whined after a while, when his colour had sunk to the lowest, and his voice

had come partially back, " that you think I've come by 'em—come by 'em dishonest? Me, that's never been so much as suspected in all my born days? I give you my dyin' oath——"

" I say nothink about suspecting you," the Connoisseur struck in coldly, unmoved by this appeal of honour, " nor about you not coming by 'em honest. And I don't want no dying oaths; not from nobody. They're no use to me in my trade. *You* let me know where they've come from, that's all, an' I'll soon say whether you've come by 'em honest or not. Now!" He prepared himself for attention. " I'm listening. Let's have it."

The Caretaker's tongue came out uneasily to ask of his lips whether they had seen friend Comforts, but there was no vestige of him there—it had been out too many times already—and the Caretaker's courage sank visibly with his colour.

" I've 'ad a deal o' trouble in my time——" he began, in a voice whose tendency was unmistakably towards tears, but the Connoisseur stopped him.

" And you're giving *me* a deal," he said unfeelingly. " I know you've had trouble or you wouldn't come to see me. I'm here to see people that's in trouble, and give 'em such lawful assistance as I can, and trust 'em to the best o' my power. But there's a end to trust when it comes to drawing-room chiny and marble time-pieces from such as you, and I want a answer. Now! Don't keep me waiting here all night. Whose are they?"

Twice the Caretaker clucked in his throat.

" They belonged," he began unsteadily, " they belonged my dear wife."

"To be sure!" said the Connoisseur, as though that much were understood. "And who did they belong to before her?"

"They was given 'er," said the Caretaker, still more slowly, "by a faithful an' lovin' friend."

"Ah!" commented the Connoisseur. "And who might *she* be, now? Let's have a name for her."

The Caretaker gave it tremulously.

"And where might she live, now?" asked the Connoisseur. "We may as well have her address while we are about it."

For the dim-lit shop was far away from the maiden lady's house, and from the special parish of poor people whom she was good to.

The Caretaker gave that, in turn.

"What?" asked the Connoisseur, some dim light of understanding filtering into his brain, like the dim yellow light in his shop. "Her at the stone house, set back a piece, behind them big trees?"

The Caretaker, breathing more heavily as the Connoisseur's interrogative pursuit pressed him dangerously nearer and nearer home, said: "That's 'er. Behind them trees."

"And if I was to take this here clock up to her to-night," said the Connoisseur, with his eye as steady on the Caretaker, and glinting as dangerously as the barrel of a gun, "and was to say to her——"

"She's away, though," said the Caretaker. "Been away this year or more."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Connoisseur significantly. "And a long way too, I make no doubt."

" Australy," said the Caretaker. " With a nevvy."

" And you, now ? " proceeded the Connoisseur, turning his eye suddenly, as though to fix the personal part of him. " Where do *you* live ? Come ! Let's have it correct this time, for I'll wager a hundred pounds to a hay-seed that I've not been told it yet. Now, quick with you."

The Caretaker yielded the address in a cornered whisper, as though it were his own ghost he was giving up, and long the Connoisseur looked at him with his peering eye.

" And so you live there, do you ? " he enquired, after a pause.

" Caretaker," said the wooden-legged man, and the Connoisseur " Ah'd " triumphantly.

" Now, I'll tell you what ! " he took up, when he had given his eye the full honours and emoluments of victory. " I'll tell you what, my man. I want no unpleasantness in my shop—and I lay *you* don't—and so we're agreed ; and here's what we'll do. We'll take this clock back to where it come from—do you see ?—and we'll get all them little bits of paper that we've had given us from time to time—do you see ?—and before five o'clock to-morrow night we'll come back here—do you see ?—and reclaim every blessed article we've left here. I want no unpleasantness, and you don't, and that's how we'll fix it. But if you don't bring them papers back by then—and the money, too—there'll be unpleasantness for us both to regret. You hear what I say ? "

The Caretaker burst into tears.

" Five o'clock to-morrow night ? " he sobbed

despairingly. "As I'm a honest man I couldn't do it, mister."

"Oh, yes, you could, now," said the Connoisseur, without emotion. "And you will. You'll be here punctual, with a few minutes to spare if you're wise, and we'll settle up to a farthing." For the Connoisseur was a Connoisseur in every kind of trouble, and could judge them all by smell.

"To-morrow?" wept the Caretaker wildly. "No, no. See 'ow afflicted I am, an' for God's sake 'ave a bit o' mercy. Think what I've gone through an' give me while next week. Next week, mister. Give me while next week an' I'll come back faithful."

"Next week!" retorted the Connoisseur with scorn. "Look what a ample time that would be for me or you to die in. See what's done in a week—in half a week—in a couple of days. Time enough for the whole police force to come down here and cause unpleasantness. No. While I've got them things belonging your dear wife about me I shan't sleep comfortable, and I won't 'ave my sleep spoiled for you nor nobody. Five's my time, and I stick to it. Now do you understand? And think on you don't let the clock strike too far ahead of you, or I may be doing something in a hurry."

Broken in spirit and in bearing, white as chalk and in a painful tremble, the Caretaker bowed his head—for he could not have spoken then to save his life—and made a mute sign as though to unfold his paper and possess himself of the timepiece, but the Connoisseur stopped him. "No, you don't!" said he. "On second thoughts you leave that where it is. Do you

see? Leave it here with me while you call for it to-morrow before five. I'll watch it don't run away."

He pushed the timepiece possessively to the far proprietary side of the counter, and stood while the Caretaker took leave—an old and broken Caretaker with a bent back and wet and wandering eyes. Purpose was gone now, left with the Connoisseur to be called for. Only a shattered spirit and an empty bottle remained.

Walking as in a dream, from which, more than once, he entertained dim thoughts of wakening, the Caretaker moved aimlessly onward through the streets like some ghost turned loose in a strange city. Purpose was gone, but the wooden leg—that wrecker of his life and happiness—remembered still the spot made familiar by many journeys, and it brought him to the glass doors where dear friend Comforts lived. At sight of them the Caretaker hugged his empty bottle with a shaking arm, gazed at the lighted window through eyes all wet with longing and despair, and, fumbling in his pockets, produced the last few coins.

"They won't!" he said despairingly, at sight of them. "Nay, they won't, for all I've been a good customer."

Nevertheless, urged forward by the insatiable thirst for friendship, he fought his way through the swing doors, that seemed almost imbued with strength and will to contest his entry, and plunged into the blaze of light beyond.

A few minutes later he struggled out into the street again, cherishing his bottle with the solicitude for a

thing alive. For the fat-faced barman had displayed unlooked-for qualities of heart. He had pushed back the Caretaker's supplicating coppers with magnanimity, and distilled new life of friendship into the Caretaker's empty bottle ; sixpennyworth at the very least, " for old time's sake."

" You've been a good customer when you *'ad* it," said he, " and I never tread on them that's down. I may come to want it myself, some day. Here you are, and think on an' go steady with it this time ! "

Back in the familiar kitchen, the Caretaker installed sixpennyworth of friend upon the table and seated himself by his side—a travesty of the Caretaker that had gone out, and, but for something familiar about the wooden leg, almost unrecognisable as the Caretaker that had sat down on the same chair at the maiden lady's bidding, and told her : " Very 'eavy it is to lift. Very 'eavy it is." Wet with tears that had traced their course in furrows of comparative cleanliness down his grimy and neglected face, he laid his sad case before friend Comforts without delay. Friend Comforts did his best for him in turn, but sixpennorth of Comforts when all is said and done has neither the sympathy nor yet the eloquence of three shillingsworth of Comforts, and the Caretaker's grief lay on him heavy and unmoved.

" Everybody's again' me," he snivelled, undoing with a finger the cleansing office of a tear. " Five o'clock to-morrow—not a minute later 'e says, an' means it—an' God knows where the money's comin' from. Afflicted as I am, an' troubled as I 'ave been. Fifty-three—goin' on fifty-four—an' to be let come

to this, without a 'and to 'elp me. It's cruel 'ard. It's cruel 'ard."

Sixpennorth of Comforts must have been a direct descendant of the Comfort that ministered to Job, for he shook his head as the Caretaker had shaken his head and repeated " Cruel 'ard—cruel 'ard " a number of times, without trying to make any better of it.

" And look you ! " said sixpennorth of Comforts. " What'll happen you for all this ? Will they say : " Here's a poor, long-sufferin' creatur that ought to ave 'ad somethink done for 'im years an' years ago ? ' No. They'll say : ' Make a example of 'im, so as nobody else needn't expect to 'ave nothink done for 'em.' An' away you goes to prison as if you was a common thief—you that's never been so much as suspected all these years."

" Aye, but I won't go ! " the Caretaker cried, striking the table with terrible, feeble passion at the picture conjured up by this dark prediction. " I won't go. Not for 'er, nor yet for 'im, with 'is blamin' five o'clock, nor yet for them. Let 'em so much as try an' lift a 'and to me an' I'll do away with myself sooner than they shall touch me."

In the fierce crisis of his desperation he seized the bottle, and the last of sixpennorth of Comforts went down to join his trouble at a gulp. At the same moment, as he buried his face in his arms, sobbing under the twofold calamity of his trouble and the loss he had by that rash act sustained, the front door bell—that hung the first and largest of a long line of bells along the opposite wall—jerked up its head and burst into a loud and startling peal. The face that had dropped

down, all streaming, on to the Caretaker's outstretched sleeves rose up a ghastly, ashen white, and his eyes fixed the dancing bell, that laughed now so silently and horribly on the kitchen wall, with a look that bore, among looks, the same relation as a whisper among voices ; a look of agony suppressed, and of terror almost too terrified to see. Again the bell rang, and the Caretaker rose to his feet as though an unseen finger, of irresistible authority, had beckoned him. The battle of emotions on the old man's face was terrible in the extreme ; the whole countenance seemed rent with purposes in conflict ; now swelling as though to burst ; now subsiding with a ghastly shrinkage, as though the face had fallen in, or were being inwardly withdrawn to an infinite distance. A third time the bell rang deliriously on the wall, and the Caretaker, white and trembling, turned down the kitchen gas. In the semi-darkness he groped for and found something in the drawer of the kitchen dresser, and, carrying this, he stole forward as noiselessly as his wooden leg would let him. Darker still was the hall when he came to it, and from the far side of the barred front door came a murmur of men's voices in council ; a sound of feet scraped impatiently on the outer steps. The Caretaker listened a brief while in the darkness, breathing heavily, and then commenced his laborious, noiseless ascent of the stairs.

" Not for 'er nor nobody ! " the broken voice kept mumbling through the shaken lips. " Not for 'er nor nobody. They don't lay a 'and on me. Fifty-three, an' goin' on fifty-four I am, with nothink done for me, an' they shan't do nothink now."

And the Caretaker's last words were respected. For from the first landing he launched his shaken figure into eternity at the end of a cord that had, once upon a time, served to gird his dear wife's box. And there he dangled slowly in the dark, turning as the clothes-line twisted, with a sort of defiant attestation to all the walls in succession, seeming to say: "They shan't do nothink now. Fifty-three, an' goin' on fifty-four I am, with nothink done for me, an' they shan't do nothink now."

And even whilst he swung, and his ears were filling with the roar of Death's Catch-'em-alive-O express, bearing down inexorably upon him, he heard, like a muffled, far-away tinkle, the laughter of the dancing bell. But it was for the last time. Less than a minute after the footsteps and men's voices faded in departure down the drive.

And neither of the two men was "him" that the Caretaker had feared; and neither of the two was "them." They were gentlemen both, and they spoke of the Caretaker, not as a man to be blamed or pitied, but as a man to be envied. Perhaps they were right.

"It seems a strange thing," said one, as they passed out through the drive gates, beyond the stone wall and the fringe of chestnut trees, "her infatuation for the fellow. To my remembrance he was a surly, uncivil sort of chap—and neither a teetotaller nor too fond of work by all accounts."

"Ah, well," laughed the other, "he'll have no need to work now"—which was true enough. "You see, by the codicil she left the bulk to her nephew; failing him, in the event of his death, to her dear and faithful

servant ; and, in the event of her predecease, to her faithful servant's dear, devoted husband. Ten pounds a week at least." They both laughed somewhat hysterically, and the first man said in a voice almost of disgust : " What luck ! "

Yes, what luck ! For now the Caretaker was safe out of the reach of all anxiety or trouble. Fifty-three, and going on fifty-four, and absolutely independent. Independent of him. Independent of them. Independent of her. Independent of all that had lifted hand against him, or would have wrested his good fortune from him if they could. So let him dangle peacefully at the end of his new-found happiness, turning his closed eyes to the four walls of the home that was once the maiden lady's, and was now his—the home that is very like ourselves, Sarah, giving back love and brightness where love and brightness are given—and so let each one of us be caretakers after our manner and degree, and regulate our own lives in honour and integrity, that some day something may be done for us as well, and we too, in our turn, may come to know the peace of independence.

The Will of God

The Will of God was hideous to look upon ; monster-headed, dull-eyed, slobber-mouthed ; misshapen even beyond all reach of human sympathy. No one could see him without a shudder of repugnance except his mother ; and his mother loved him.

Years before, when the Will of God had been a living part of her, flesh of her flesh and life of her life, his mother's heart had beaten above him in a quickened strain of gladness and hope ; his mother's lips had sung hymns of praise and gratitude that she, who had so long known but the inattention of a drunken husband, should be at last blessed with the caresses of a very child. To the pangs which are the tollage of maternity she looked forward with eager eyes. "For now," said she, "I shall have something belonging to me that will love me and make life a bit brighter." And her vision only clouded when she thought of her husband and the minor sacrifices that her blessed sufferings would entail upon him, for he was a hard man, who made allowance for nothing but his own shortcomings. Long she cherished her dear secret apart from him in the privacy of her heart. Nay, his very presence scared her joy, as if it had been a bird, so that it only sang to her when she was solitary. But her eyes informed him at last of what her lips had not the courage to confide, and from that same hour he seemed to treat her harder. Her joys were

surreptitious joys henceforth, snatched by stealth, and tasting of tears. If marriage had not parted them wide enough before, this was the one thing needful to effect their separation. Had she been guilty of unfaithfulness her husband could not have reproached her more bitterly.

" Isn't two mouths plenty to fill," he cried at her, " but what you must needs want a third ? "

" Me ? " said his wife. " It's a cruel thing to go and blame me that's more to be pitied if the truth was spoke. It'll be as much yours as mine when it comes. And God knows I'm as sorry as you are—if this is all it brings with it."

Her husband ground his feet beneath the table, which was—when he did not swear—his mode of expressing anger. " You're a lie ! " he said. " A damned lie you are, with your sorry. I'd care less if you was sorry, but you aren't sorry. You're glad. That's what you are, and that's where it is. You're glad, I tell you—as glad as you can be. This is what you've been wanting ever sin' the day we was wed, an' what you've been praying for, very like, when my back was turned. An' now you've got your way, and let me go to Jericho for all you care, so long as there's a bairn to look after.

" Come ! " he cried. " *You*'re glad. *I*'ll be glad. *I*'ll show you. Two can play at that game. We'll both be glad."

And that night, in order to show her, he came home quite as drunk as usual ; but his wife shed bitter tears, for her new-found gladness made this old trouble seem deeper and more dreadful than before.

Like a thief now she had to hide all traces of her joy from his jealous eyes, as though it were a booty ill-gotten. At the sound of her husband's step, loose or firm, swiftly she darkened her heart and extinguished the light in her eyes like the thief's candle, lest he might detect the glimmer of her gladness and make it the text for his own excesses. But in the Bible of her husband's grievance there were other texts as potent and as ready to the tongue. Their home did not afford so many places of sure concealment but that, one day, he found the miserable provision of a child's garment, with the tell-tale needle still thrust into it at the end of its white thread, which she had secreted hurriedly and clumsily on his approach. The discovery was as good as drink to him almost, for his lips could not let it alone.

"Aye! Here we are!" cried he confirmatively, seizing hold of the wisp of a garment in his great fist. "Here's what we've come to. Here's what we think most about. What you dursn't do before my face you goes and does behind my back. You're to trust to, aren't you! I know you. This is a business to your taste, this is—with your sorry. You haven't been happier for Lord knows the day when. The moment I turns my back you sets to work enjoying yourself proper. Here's all you can think about—a bairn that you don't know whether it'll be a boy or a girl, alive or dead."

At the last terrible word the woman winced, for he had struck one of her own fears.

"Please God, not that!" she faltered. "Please God it may be spared to be a comfort to us—both."

" Comfort ! " echoed her husband derisively. " Aye, it looks like comfort for me. It does an' all." He shook the great fist, and the small garment encompassed in it, once more. " Here's all we can think about nowadays. I'm nobody no longer. Here's where our mind is, and where our money goes." And ever after that, when he came home sober enough, he would cry : " Now, what are we a-hiding of now ? "

Thus was the Will of God wrought towards fulfilment, amid tears and tremblings, dire dismay, dread forebodings, and the forlornest of hopes. At every sound of the husband's footstep the blood that should have fed him with calm and healthy nourishment flowed turbid with agitation and alarm. Whether the man was drunk or whether he was sober, he was equally an object of apprehension and of fear. Even when he was comfortably afar some sudden real suggestion of his presence would send the woman's hand under her heart and cause her to sit down with a pitiful : " Oh, dear me ! " of perplexity and distress. By day she feared his tongue, and by night it was his weight she stood in awe of, for doubly when drunk was he a heavy man to lift. And often had she to do the more than half of lifting him up their narrow stairs to bed, lying sleepless herself for hours after, to the sound of his stertorous breathing ; all her mother's solicitude awake with the dread that, in helping him, she had done her more beloved an irreparable wrong. Thus, with all her hearing turned inwardly, she would listen terrified to the beating of her heart, and strive to glean from her pulses some message to reassure her of the well-being of the dearer than her life. At times,

perhaps, her fears were easily allayed, and in the wakefulness of consolation that ensued she would recoup herself for her reckless expenditure of terror by the most prodigal of hopes. She would see her child born—the joy of her heart, and the providential turning-point in her husband's perverse career. Pride of fatherhood should revive his sinking self-esteem, and recall some of his old love for her which she had once been led to think existed in him.

" If this had only come when we was first married," she ventured to assure herself, at such delusive moments of exaltation, " instead of now, he might never have got to be the man he is. But we must be thankful it's come when it has, for please God he's not so bad but what he can be mended."

He was not so bad but what he could be mended, but Providence was very busy mending drunkards at a great temperance revival in Wales, by half a gross at a time, and could not be troubled with retail orders. " Send him back to the workshop," said Providence at last, after many weeks of the woman's prayers, and an angel was despatched to fetch him. The angel found him on a tall scaffolding—for the woman's husband was a foreman builder—and the angel touched him lightly with a finger, and the beer that was in him from overnight rose in a sudden suffusion to his brain, and the mortal part of him fell forty odd feet to the pavement where a crowd of some hundreds seemed already to have marked out a ring for his reception.

And now a greater crowd followed the foreman builder on his melancholy journey than ever would

have troubled to pursue for five yards the body of the soberest man that died in bed. True, it was not a particularly reputable crowd, for the more reputable elements dropped out along the way in strict proportion to their reputability; but there were three policemen, and a belated reporter jotting down the details in his note-book as he walked, and scores of children, and any number of dogs—and it made the morning memorable for all who met it. Even men of eminence and position drew to the kerb and craned their necks in an eminent way, and condescended to seek enlightenment of shabby passers-by, shaking their heads when informed, and saying "A bad business; a bad business!" Philanthropic ladies, accustomed to visit infirmaries and hospital wards and frequent poorhouses, were thrown into a sort of philanthropic frenzy at the sight of the procession, and flew all ways at once, asking indiscriminately of everybody about them—of the passing outrunners of the crowd; of strange loafers brought from their natural haunts by a love of company and adhering to the greater number with the gregarious instinct of their class; of shrill-voiced children, waltzing along in morbid exuberance like so many pentecostal dancers, every now and then indulging in a heightened caper with intent to catch one brief, exultant glimpse of the canvas-shrouded bier over the shoulders of its full-grown retinue—of all of these frenzied philanthropic ladies made enquiry; asking who it was, and what had happened, and shocking, shocking! and how careful it should teach us all to be. Other ladies, less habituated to benevolence and hospitals, brought suddenly in face of the

ominous procession, fled incontinently up side passages and into shop doors with a gasp of apprehension and alarm, whence they would emerge timorously to pursue enquiries after the thing had passed by. And all in front of the rabble ran boys and girls, whose chief delight seemed to lie in the anticipation of the general progress, and the prognostication of the route that the crowd would follow.

A few minutes before the time when the foreman builder should have gone home under ordinary circumstances and cried: "Now what are we a-hiding of?" there came a step outside the woman's door, and her knees trembled.

"Lord o' me!" she said, holding up her faltering heart with a weak hand. "Here's him come home again, and wanting his meal, and me not ready. Let's look alive." And in her agitated way she commenced to look alive, though to be sure it was more like looking dead; and laid the frail white cloth with her frail worn hands, and smoothed the creases out of its careworn countenance—her own countenance, that looked down upon it, as careworn; and was setting out the bone-hafted knife and the black-hafted three-pronged fork for the foreman builder's dinner when the steps stopped, and there came a knock at the door.

If the steps had deceived her ear, the knock did not deceive her instinct. It fell, lugubrious and dead, upon the door panel—a knock inexorable. Not any knock born of custom, as the postman's, which is dispassionate; or the tax-collector's, which is imperative; or the rent collector's, which (at the door of a good tenant) is ingratiatory and genial; or a borrower's, which is

apologetic; but a knock direct from Fate's hard knuckles, that blanched the woman's cheek and made her lay hold of the two corners of the table.

"Yon's trouble!" she said, in an awed whisper. "I know it." And trouble went to meet trouble.

There was a bricklayer's labourer at the door whom she knew vaguely by sight. If she had known him less she might have been less alarmed, but he was associated with her husband, and formed a strong link in the chain of her trouble. Over the bricklayer's labourer's shoulder she realised hazily the heads of many women gathered at many open doors in twos and threes, all with their eyes on her. One or two of these women had woven their hands in their aprons and held them pressed over their mouths; children hugged their skirts and played peep-bo about them. The faces of others seemed wry and distorted with queer smiles that were yet not smiles; but all were silent, and the very yard seemed hushed.

"Missus——" said the bricklayer's labourer in a low voice, standing on the scoured threshold and rubbing his palms awkwardly together, as though he were rolling out tobacco.

"Something's happened him!" cried the woman in a weak voice, holding on to the doorknob and supporting herself with a hand against the wall.

"Aye!" said the bricklayer's labourer.

The woman's eyes and the bricklayer's labourer's eyes met in a sort of grapple. The bricklayer's labourer's eyes threw the woman's eyes off after a second, and eluded the strenuousness of their hold.

"You don't mean——" said the woman, and her

face suddenly shrank very small, and was ashen rather than white. "You don't tell me he's——"

"Aye!" acquiesed the bricklayer's labourer. "He is. They said I was to come an' let you know."

She looked at the man's face so long that it grew unrecognisable, the centre of a spinning Catherine-wheel of women's faces and twisted aprons; and then she subsided to the ground without a word. From the darkness of oblivion she awoke to the pangs of labour, Providence deeming one trouble not adequate for a frail woman of her build. Before nightfall the Will of God was born, and Providence sent her her third and culminating trouble in one day. For her husband's death she had fainted; the pains of childbirth had not drawn from her a groan, but at the sight of the son that was to have made all darkness light for her, when they lifted up the malformed head and twisted limbs, she turned away her face and wept inconsolably upon her pillow.

"There, there, there!" soothed the midwife, giving reassuring touches to the coverings of the bed that shook beneath the afflicted woman's sobs. "Don't take on, now. Don't. For it can't make a bit o' difference. Not a bit it can't. You've done *your* best, that everybody knows; but you've had a deal o' trouble, and trouble's bound to tell. Perhaps the Lord in His mercy will think fit to take it away again before so long. Often He does when they come like this. Gives 'em convulsions, and calls 'em mercifully home again before they're old enough to know no better. And it's to be hoped He will, I'm sure, poor little darling," she said aside to the assistant midwife

(neighbours, both of them), " for I never *did* set eyes on such a bairn."

" The kindest thing we could do for them both," said the doctor, " would be to drown it." But to the woman, hugging the grotesque image of infancy, with its great, ungainly head, he only said : " Come, come, mother. Let's try and cheer up. It's not always the best babies that make the best men and women. I know a six months' baby that had to be brought up in cotton-wool, more dead than alive. As fine a fellow to-day as you might wish to meet. And yours is within a fortnight of full time. We shall see better in a month or two how we're going on."

True. They saw better in a month or two, but the sight—to human eyes—looked worse. At first they thought the child was blind, for its dull eyes displayed no enquiry or perplexity of dawning intelligence. They thought, too, it was deaf, for it never turned when they spoke or snapped their fingers, or sucked their breath cajolingly through their piped lips. And they thought it must be dumb, for it never cried as other children cried, or made gurgling noises that are the embryo of laughter. It lay, only distinguishable from death by its breathing ; a ghastly form of life inanimate.

" Whatever would my poor dear husband 'a said if he'd lived ! " the woman reflected tearfully. " It do seem almost a mercy he was spared the sight, though God knows I miss him hard enough."

" Why, there you are ! " the cheerful midwife told her. " That's something to be thankful for and keep you from fretting too much over them that's gone.

Who knows, poor man, but if he'd lived it might 'a made a bit o' trouble betwixt you, for he was not, as you might say, a family man, for all he had everybody's good word. Some men isn't."

The curate of the parish she lived in called to bring comfort to the afflicted widow, and to look, reluctant, on the spectacle of her afflicted child. They were indeed a grievous couple, heavily smitten by the hand of Providence, but the curate was young and sanguine, and filled with visions of preferment, and in his ardour no affliction was too great to be reconciled with the comprehensive theology that everything is for the best, and that the worse a thing is the more for the best faith ought to deem it ; and the widow and her child were excellent practice for one inspired with a divine resolve to rise in his profession. These afflictions of hers were but proofs of God's love of her. God knew that too much happiness in this world led people to forget Him, so God spoke to their hearts through trouble. Every sorrow was the voice of God saying, " Come—come unto Me, all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." That was God's message to every suffering soul in the sinful world that God loved, and for whose redemption He had allowed His dear Son to suffer on the Cross. That was God's message to her. Would she accept His message? Would she accept His message, sent to her through this poor, distorted child, and answer: " Oh God, I come ? "

" If you wish me, sir," she sobbed, for his eloquence and her own affliction had drawn forth her tears in full course.

"Let us pray," said he. And he fell on his knees and thanked God for all the widow's afflictions—thanked God for her husband's death that left her now dependent on her own exertions for a living; thanked God (inferentially) for her husband's drink, that had led to her husband's death; thanked God for having known best what was good for her, and disregarded her prayers for her husband's conversion; thanked God for this twisted specimen of His handiwork that had been sent to reprove her for having desired the love of a son rather than the love and knowledge of God. They thanked God that He had mercifully restored her strength in preparation for earning her living, as they would have thanked Him not less devoutly had He loved her well enough to leave her a cripple, dependent providentially upon the world.

They had to pass the child on their way out, and the curate forced himself to look at it. He looked at it gravely, for indeed it was a problem, and he bowed slightly and silently, as though before the presence of Almighty God.

"Courage," he said in a lowered voice to the widow, "Courage and faith. It is the Will of God."

Courage, widow! It is the Will of God. God's cruelty is but the tenderness of His arm, that would shield you from something still more terrible—the fire of His anger.

The curate went out into the sunlight, and the sky was very blue. He looked up at it, and drew in, as it were, a deep draught of fresh faith and fervour, for the widow's room was only small. Surely (thought he) the world is very beautiful, and life is very sweet for

those that have true peace with God, and view the world through eyes of faith. Only to the wayward and the wicked, the froward, the impatient, and the vain, is earth without its evidences of God's love. And with the blue sky and the golden sunlight he tried to obliterate the picture of the widow's child, for the remembrance of its monstrous head marred the unity of his own soul and its appreciation of God's handiwork.

And now the lonely widow, bowed beneath the abundance of God's graces, commenced the second part of life's pilgrimage with her idiot child, as she had accomplished the first part with her drunken husband, and the world fell slowly away from her. In the initial days of her trouble her humility had hungered for every crumb of compassion, for every grain of pity, and the world had not stinted its supply. Whenever the yard felt lonely, or in need of a little wholesome excitement—generally after the dinner-hour, when the yard's husbands had gone off to work again—the yard would remember the widow, and say to the yard's daughters :

" Now, you wash them pots up like a good girl, Janie, and side up the fender, and get them cinders riddled, and look after your brother 'Erbert, while mother goes to see how poor Mrs. Ephraim's getting on."

And the yard would go, wrapping its bare arms in its apron as an alternative to pulling down its sleeves, and knock at the widow's door, and cry against the keyhole before entering :

" Are you there'm, Mrs. Ephraim ? It's only me'm."

And " only me'm " would push her way in with neighbourly freedom—for true affliction knows no such word as intrusion—and would invite the widow to unbosom herself again for sympathy's delectation. And the widow, all reserve knocked out of her by suffering, would unbosom herself forthwith. She was only mortal, and she missed her husband, for he had always been consistent in his unkindness, and now the lack of his sustaining cruelty was like a prop gone.

" Nobody knows, missus," she would weep to the weeping yard, " what it feels like to be left without him. I do declare, when you comes up to the door just now and clicks the latch, it gives me quite a turn for a moment, for how often has my poor dear man come up to the door the same, and clicked yon latch as it might be now."

" Aye. Oftens I've seen him myself, missus," said the yard commiserately ; " though I never did think, to be sure, what a dreadful end it would lead to."

" He would click the latch," cantillated the widow to her sad harp, " and in he would come. Reg'lar, he would."

" Why, the very day before he was took, missus, I seed him as he come home to his tea. Up he walks to this door, and in he comes, as well as ever I seed him. ' There's Mr. Ephraim,' says I."

" He would come in," the widow continued, " an' his first question would be : ' Now, missus, what are we a-hiding of ? ' for, poor dear man, I do believe he was a bit jealous of—of "—the widow indicated the Will of God with a bend of her tearful head—" yon. An' he couldn't seem to bide that I should do aught

for nobody but him. Not that he meant anything by it, I know. It was nobbut his way."

"Aye, indeed; aye, indeed!" commented the yard. "And nat'ral enough. He'd never been used to childer, and was mebbe feared it might come betwixt him and you."

"He had his faults, I'll own," conceded the widow, "but they was good faults."

"Why, when you come to look at it," said the yard, "what's a little sup now and again? There's many worse things in the world."

"He always did it open," wept the widow. "He always let his faults show at top. An' I never begrudged him what drop he had. It's a bit of comfort to me"—here she wept harder—"now he's gone."

"My word!" wailed the yard. "If only every man had as much comfort as you gave yours."

"I have my faults," the widow poured out, "like he had *his* few, poor dear, and I might 'a made things comfortabler for him if I'd tried. An' I *should* 'a tried if I'd known his time was to be so short. That's what I reproach myself with, mostling. The very morning of Wednesday, as he was took of a Thursday, he says to me: 'You'll p'raps be happy when I'm gone,' and I've wondered since whether he had a inkling."

"Very like, missus; very like!" snivelled the yard. "They do say folks gets warning when anything's going to happen 'em."

"Being his wife, I ought to 'a seen it," the widow wept. "An' I ought to 'a warned him: 'Be careful of them ladders.' But I never thought, and I never

did, and it's what I've reproached myself with scores of times."

"Why, dear me!" consoled the yard. "You had plenty on your mind with what was coming over you, without no need to worrit for what was coming over him. An' it couldn't 'a done the least bit o' good, for there's no holding anybody back when it's their time to go. He couldn't 'a stopped this coming over you, and you couldn't stop that coming over him."

"That's true," said the widow, drying her eyes under the consolation with her apron corner, and the yard would dry its eyes too, in preparation for a good look at the Will of God; and it would go forth, encouraging the widow to fortitude with loudly cheerful voices, and whispering sinisterly about its own doors:

"Lord 'a mercy, Mrs. Bayliss! What a affliction! To think such a thing might happen me or you!"

"Goodness, missus! Don't! You make me shiver."

"Did you take notice of its poor eyes? I do think they get worse."

"And what a head, missus! I declare, I should be fit to scream if I was to be left alone with yon bairn in the dark. As for sleeping with it of a night——"

"Mrs. Merton says she's sure it'll go off at teething, or else it'll grow up to be a imbecile."

Thus were all its afflictions mapped out by these gruesome geographers; not a defect unnoted; not a scrap of territory but was proudly claimed by its discoverer. And the Will of God became a nine days' wonder in its own small portion of the world, so that the yard had more friends calling on it than usual, and

not to have seen the widow's child was to be lacking in one of the chief marks of social distinction.

But all this took place in the early days, when the widow's broken spirit sought support in the liquid nourishment of tears, being yet incapable of solid fare, and while her pride lay prostrate and insensible. With returning strength pride lifted up its head, and pride's ears, quickened, caught the whispers. Too much pity borders on contempt. What is sympathy in sickness becomes scorn in health. All her maternity rose up to shield the child of her bearing from any gaze of the curious, or any other look than that of love.

" He is my child," she said almost fiercely to herself, " and would have been his father's child if his father had lived. Let them look to their own—that isn't all so beautiful that they need be proud of—and leave me mine."

And one day—though if the yard had been possessed of any organs of perception, any antennæ of sensitiveness, it must have marked the growing change in her —the cooped-up resentment against this continual assault of pity found a sudden vent.

" Poor dear darling, indeed ! " she cried at the yard, with a hectic flame in each cheek, when the yard was shaking its head over her child's cradle. " Why don't you say ' Ugly devil ' and be done with it ! For that's what you do mean ; deny it you can't. You only come to look so as you can go away and talk about it, and set everybody shaking their heads at it and me. But I can get on very well without nobody shaking their heads on my account, if folks'll only let me alone an' not go whispering again' their doors. You think a

deal of your own childer, that's screaming an' crying all day long, but God made mine as made yours, an' He sees no difference betwixt 'em. My bairn's the Will of God, and what more is yours ? "

" Well ! I'm sure ! " said the yard, straightening its back and gasping. " You've took my breath away, *you* have, Mrs. Ephraim. The times I've troubled to come in and look at you. If a body can't say a word of sympathy before your face without being flared at, it's queer gratitude. It is, my word ! "

And the yard went out full of dazed indignation, and drummed on all the doors, and forth came all the arms wrapped in aprons to a conference ; and the yard began : " Would you believe ! " and the conference responded : " Well, of all the things ! " And as for the widow, as soon as the yard was gone she flung her head recklessly on to the table and wept tears of contrition, humility, anger, and rebellion. And from that day she latched her door.

It was a pity, perhaps, for there is no such thing as pure, unadulterated friendship in the world, and if we would not exclude all friendship we must take it with its inherent imperfections, its dross of envy and uncharitableness and enmity, just as we swallow the material impurities in our food. The yard forgave the widow for her tongue, but the offence of the inner latch was almost beyond forgiveness. Incredulity, when the first apron returned with the intelligence, gave place (after the tidings had been confirmed, at intervals, by every dweller in the yard) to a burst of general indignation.

" The very idea ! " said one apron, which combined

the offices of duster, petticoat, dishcloth, towel, napkin, and pocket-handkerchief. "As though folks wasn't to be trusted!"

"Does she think we'd go and steal?" cried a second.

"She needn't be frightened of anybody taking bairn!" said a third. "That I *do* know."

There was a laugh of derisive concurrence that went to the widow's heart through the ear that she held close to her own door.

"She might think we was fond o' going inside to look at bairn," said the first apron. "My word! For my part I'd rather stay where I am."

"She could leave door open when she wanted us," cried the second once more.

"An' she'll leave it open again when she's in trouble," said the first.

"She's that proud, missus," voiced another.

"What's she got to be proud of?" demanded the aprons in general. "Dear me! What if her husband did make good money! He gave her none of it, so she needn't set herself up. Everybody knows he drank shameful."

"Scarcely a night sober did 'e come home, missus."

"Yes, but she tries to make everybody believe what a good 'usband he was to her, and talks about him as though he was a saint. A nice thing to have to listen to for them that knew him and his goings-on. Yard's been as quiet again without him."

"Aye, but she'll never make *me* believe!" chanted the aprons in chorus. "Nor me." "Nor yet me." "Nor yet nobody else that sees yon bairn," said the

first apron. "For what's that but all the trouble he's given her!"

And the yard became, for the time being, all the closer friends because it had now an enemy in common. The widow's portion of its friendship was shared out among the survivors, and the bones and sinews of the widow's injury—kept sedulously simmering on the hob of the yard's indignation—gave forth a broth which strengthened its partakers to almost celestial amity. Thus out of hatred issues charity, as ill begets good, and good ill, and as the wickedness of one profits the piety of another. In the superabundant vitality of its own goodness the yard was even not indisposed to make the injurer a participant in the fellowship which her injury had developed so cordially among the injured, but the yard had spoken ill of the Will of God and her own child, and though the widow might have forgiven more material offences, she could not pardon that. Shame for her own outburst, too, restrained her from showing herself before her neighbours for some days, and during those days her injured pride—that attentive kindness alone could have kept plastic—hardened and set. When the yard looked upon her again she was an altered woman, with averted eyes and a strained mouth, and a step that was timid and fugitive. She did not carry hostility so far as to withhold a greeting from the yard when she passed through, but it was a nervous greeting, under the lips, as though her very words might be undesirably laid hold of to pull her to a stop by somebody's door. Little by little she became one of those familiar, unfamiliar figures, whose features, seen day by day, take on the elusive characteristic

of the possessor and refuse to make friends with our memories, as their possessors refuse to make friends with our persons. Seen but a moment before, the mind can scarcely retain their picture until the moment after. Confronted on a sudden, the eye sees something new and unexpected in them that the eye has never previously noted. They are familiar as the stars, and their very familiarity makes us forget how little we know about them.

The one thing that a yard cannot understand is reticence. It can understand drink, or hate, or love, or anger ; all that the yard does itself it can understand ; but what the yard does not it ceases to understand ; and the day that the widow latched her door it ceased to understand the widow. And since, with yards, not to understand a person in one thing is to misunderstand a person in all things, the yard did not understand the widow in anything. The Will of God was hidden away from them, but its memory went on growing in their minds as its own body grew behind the widow's jealously guarded door and her tightly curtained window, and with true yard-like perversity they transferred the grotesqueness of what they could not see to what they could see. So the widow did not walk unattended before them. Wherever she went the distorted spirit of her idiot boy was wrapped about her, enveloping all her goings and all her comings in a shroud of gruesome mystery. It was almost with a thrill that the yard saw her issue from her door ; almost with a thrill that the yard whispered : " Look ! See ye ! She's turning key. She's locking bairn in."

It was almost with a thrill that the yard watched this lonely woman take her noiseless course down the paving-stones with the quick, furtive step of one that does not court attention.

The period of teething passed by, and the yard heard the idiot weeping, but it brought no blessing of convulsions Convulsions came and took off one of the yard's own children—the little one with golden hair—and the yard wept and lived three days with the bereaved mother; and the widow stole along the paving-stones with a more fugitive step than ever, and faded into the house like a phantom, for the weight of the yard's eyes now was an open accusation.

"I know what they're saying," she cried to herself within doors. "An' why should mine be took any more than hers? My own's as precious to me as other folk's childer."

And during these days of bereavement the widow's home was a fortress, and she in siege against the silent investment of the yard. Every cry of her child, that she strove to hush, was like a shot fired against her assailants; every glance of the yard at her tight curtains was a projectile aimed at her happiness. Whenever she passed down the causeway with the key clasped in her nervous fingers she gained the street through a fusillade of eyes. They bore away the golden-headed child in its small coffin of pine and brass tinsel, and above their own snivels, as the tiny relic emerged, the yard heard the lamentation of the teething idiot: "Ah-oo! Ah-oo! Ah-oo!"

"Aye, an' a nice idea for her, poor thing!" the yard said, after the weeping mother had passed forth,

sobbing behind her handkerchief. " A nice thing for her to hear yon creature crying out alive, and her own bairn dead i' front of her."

The funeral party returned, devoid of the relic in its case of pine and brass. Before the month was at an end the dead child was no longer any passport to the yard's special favours which had been bestowed upon the afflicted mother during the early days of bereavement. Already a substitute for the golden-haired victim of convulsions was on its way, and the siege of the widow's house was raised. In its calmer moments the yard realised that, after all, it could better afford to spare a normal child than a monstrosity, and that Providence seemed, on reflection, to be justified in its choice. Even the mother admitted that " five was bad enough to feed, God knows. But where should we 'a' been, wi' fifth coming, if our Elsie'd lived ? "

The hardness of their sentiments might be softened now and again with tears, as the yard's stale crusts were soaked in tea, but the substance was not altered. And the widow that had wept such bitter tears when the Will of God was first held up to her would have wept still bitterer tears had he now been taken away. Much looking had removed the hideous abnormalities of her child ; all the care that had issued in maternal gazings from her eyes seemed to have repaired to some degree God's faulty handiwork ; and much love, or much familiarity, had lent an almost human semblance to the monster face. Blessedest of all, the infant had learned to recognise its mother, and what more does maternity desire ? Dearer than the blue sky were the

dull, leaden eyes that were not so blind but that they knew their mother, and drew forth—with her exultant joy in the knowledge—her rebellion at the soothsayers that had predicted ill against them. There was something terrible in the ferocity with which this weak and silent woman flung herself upon her child when its eyes sought hers, and kissed protesting cries from its slobbering mouth, exclaiming : " Who said you would be blind, then ! An' who would 'a made you deaf if they could, my beauty ! " she cried, when the great head turned slowly at her step, and the leaden eyes looked at her. Hour by hour the listening ears heard her trying to teach the slobber lips that one word to crown the joy of her mother's heart.

" Mam-mam. Say mam-mam."

And the Will of God wailed back its monotonous " Ah-oo, ah-oo ! "

All her life was given over to its care. For her the world was this monster head that rolled aimless on its pillow ; a world swimming in blessed delusions, wrapped in peace and love. She never walked half so swiftly from her door to the street as she hastened from the street to her door. To leave her child was like stretching her own life to the attenuation of elastic ; the farther away she went, the nearer to breaking-point life seemed, and the stronger the tension to return. At times she almost ran home, full of anxious desire to look again upon that dear distortion ; full of fears for some dire consequence of her absence. When at last she saw the child breathing through its great mouth in heavy slumber her fears would be swept away in a sudden gust of love and admiration.

" God bless you ! " she would cry. " That is as good as gold when its mamma is away."

And she would plunge her raptured head into the cradle and hug the child out of its slumbers, and awaken the beloved " Ah-oo, ah-oo ! " that she might be compensated for her alarms by the reward of her idiot's affection.

And at nights, when the yard's last husband had been gathered in and the yard was wrapped in sleep, she would lift the Will of God to her bosom and emerge stealthily, to give him the fresh night air which is so good for children, and let him see the beauties of the world—the bright lamps shining ; the silent policeman standing at street corners—though she always hugged him tighter when she saw these, and quickened her footsteps ; the cats slinking out of black yard-mouths and in again ; belated inebriates, the sight of whom recalled to her her husband's loss with an awakened pang ; the scavenging carts, which, like her own child and God's stars, belonged to the night ; and the great houses, roosting shoulder to shoulder in silent regiments like barn fowl. Sometimes, too, the pallid moon rose up to etch the city in blacks and whites, and stare at the Will of God till the widow drew down his veil. Then home again, to talk next day about all these two had seen ; the widow to say : " Did he see the moon then ? " or " Did he see the wicked policeman, and did he cling to his mamma, bless him ? " and the Will of God to respond with his interminable : " Ah-oo ! Ah-oo ! Ah-oo ! "—and the neighbours behind the thin wall to say : " Hark, missus ! Did ever you ! "

Thus did the days draw by, and the creak of the

widow's mangle and the muffled "Dump, dump, dump" of the widow's flat-iron, earned the bread that was for the sustenance of the Will of God; and the widow's reiterated "Mam-mam, say mam-mam," and the idiot's inflectionless "Ah-oo, ah-oo!" grew so deeply woven into the life of the yard that it noticed them scarcely more than the beating of its own heart. And, in course of time, the very path whose silent pursuit had led the widow away from the yard's favour brought her—without any design on her own part—back again within appreciable distance of its estimation. Her silence, that had once been an offence, was quoted, during moments of angry general debate, as a virtue of exceeding great excellence.

"If you was to be like Mrs. Ephraim, now," the yard would admonish sundry of its culpables with a loud and wrathful voice, "it would be a deal comfortabler for everybody. Mrs. Ephraim's never said a single wrong word against nobody all years I've known 'er."

"Mrs. Ephraim keeps herself to herself, and minds 'er own business. You don't catch Mrs. Ephraim makin' mischief."

To be sure, this restoration of Mrs. Ephraim to popularity was not accomplished without the peril of overweighting her beneath praise, and sinking her into disfavour again, for more than once the yard would respond hotly under rebuke:

"Dear me! An' who's Mrs. Ephraim, I'd like to know, that you're allus throwing her at people? There's folks in the place as good as Mrs. Ephraim, I *should* 'ope, and I won't be set down by no Mrs. Ephraim, not for you nor nobody. Mrs. Ephraim has

enough to do to earn her own living an' look after 'er bairn, without interfering betwixt me and mine. What's more, I won't be interfered with by her, so Mrs. Ephraim knows."

Yard-dwellers of a metal less tempered in God's furnace than the widow, listening to the alternate words of praise and condemnation, with a flat-iron held up to her cheek, would have been out of their doors like lightning, flat-iron in hand, to flash at the traducer:

"What's that you just been saying about Mrs. Ephraim? Mrs. Ephraim's been saying nothing about you, and don't you say nothing about Mrs. Ephraim. Mrs. Ephraim never mentioned your name, and don't you mention Mrs. Ephraim's. Mrs. Ephraim'll thank you to be let alone, or it'll be the worse for you."

But the widow had no other confidant than her child, and neither praise nor blame could elicit from her much beyond the timid "Good day'm"—except that to her accusers she said the word with a patch of red on her seamed cheeks. Her silence was less the silence of design than of habit. Even to her patrons when she called with the washing-basket she was a woman of almost embarrassing reserve. "Very well'm," "I'll try'm," "I'll do my best'm," and "That'll be quite right'm, and thank you'm" (when they paid her), were about the limits of her conversation. If her talent with the mangle and the flat-iron had been in proportion to her words, it would have fared ill with her and the Will of God, but the Will of God was ever before her eyes. Every collar extra well done was a proof that she had looked at the Will of God before laying on the iron, and said to herself: "What'll happen to you

when anything happens me, so as I can't do my work ! " And with the inexorable Will of God written down for her on this crumpled page of humanity she worked so well that mistresses took up her work with almost reverential fingers when it arrived home, and apostrophised the absent widow as though she were present (except that, under those conditions, they would have refrained from doing so), " Really, Mrs. Ephraim, how beautifully you get your starch things up, to be sure."

And doting mothers, at the sight of the widow's handiwork, were even constrained to say : " Excuse me, Mrs. So-and-so, but would you mind telling me—I've been noticing your little boy's collars—— Where *do* you get them done ? We have *such* difficulty at home ! And my husband gets *so* angry. And, I declare, only the other day——"

And they would be told whose handiwork the admired collar of the little boy was, and in this way, thanks to the Will of God, the widow's custom grew.

It grew to the point of giving almost as much offence to the yard as her early silence had done. Even the virtues of her later silence were in danger of eclipse behind prosperity. The sight of the wan woman, dwindling in stature beneath the multiplication of fattening clothes-baskets, kindled a covetous glint in the yard's eyes, and drew down the hard corners of the yard's mouth.

" Dear me ! " said the yard. " We're all clothes-baskets in these days, *we* are. I declare a body can't look out of her window but it's clothes-baskets. There's no stirring about for clothes-baskets."

The intricacy of the widow's clothes-lines, too, strung

from hook to hook in front of her home like a proposition of Euclid, for the accommodation of the greatest number of garments, stirred scarcely less of the yard's insufferance.

" If we was all to take in washing, my word ! " said the yard, " somebody would be a-hanging of theirselves."

" I don't know whether you've noticed, Mrs. Merton, but she's drove that far staple of hers a good quarter of an inch over on to your wall. I don't know whether I've done right to tell you'm, but it's made me feel that indignant. I can't abear to see nobody put upon, partic'lar a neighbour. If it was me I should make her take it out sharp—or I'd do it myself—for what right has she now to get her living at other people's expense ? It's nothing but greediness ; and lor', she's nobody but herself and bairn to keep. Not like you, now, with five mouths to fill."

" I could have as much washing as her, p'raps," declared the yard, " if my childer was a cripple."

All this the widow heard, or much of it, but she said nothing, for the Will of God had strengthened her to rare fortitude under injustice. If they could so misinterpret her deeds, her words would not better them. She drew out the offending hook from its questionable trespass and held her peace.

" Dear me ! " said the yard, that could not abear to see other people put upon, when it perceived the reparation. " So she's thought fit to move yon staple at last ! Not before time, missus ! After she's made use of it best part of a week. But if I'd been Mrs. Merton I should 'a shifted it before now."

" As like as not she thinks nobody noticed where she fixed it before," said the yard's second self. " But there's folks in the world as clever as herself."

" I heard her a-hammering of something last night," said another member of the yardly corporation, " but I was that tired I couldn't be bothered to get up and take a peep out o' winder. Folks can't that works as hard as me."

" Aye ! She thought she'd do it when there was nobody to watch her," said the yard. " Such under'and, deceitful work. Give me people that isn't ashamed o' doing what they have to do by daylight, so as other people can see 'em."

This, too, the widow heard, for the walls of houses are not built extravagantly thick at three shillings a week—and perhaps, if the truth were told, thin walls have a tendency to stimulate to an unhealthy degree the function of hearing—but she said no word. She only took more pains with her work (if that were possible), and looked at the Will of God more frequently, and hugged him harder, and made less noise in going abroad with the wash-baskets. Herself was the least consideration in her own life ; she scarcely noticed herself, indeed, through the assiduity with which she watched her child. The flat-iron and the mangle, the wash-basket and the clothes-line, were more vital factors than her own body of flesh and blood. She was merely the mind which ruled over the child's destiny ; guarded him from mishap to-day, and plotted without respite for his welfare on that great to-morrow when Eternity should throw open its vast doors and summon her, struggling between the wife's duty and the

mother's love, to leave her child and join her husband. And though, with fingers that would have been miserly but for the object which animated them, she scraped together every penny of her toil, and every farthing which could be still further scraped from some personal abnegation, wicker wash-baskets and the most geometrical of clothes-lines are but a slow route to riches. The little heap slowly mounting behind the savings bank counter was a small assurance, indeed, to the exacting requirements of a mother's heart. Such savings as could be effected by much toil and some hunger were no provision for the Will of God; the utmost they could aspire to secure for him was a little protracted ill-treatment; no more. She looked at the Will of God at times through terrible tears, scalding hot, and at her savings-book (such a volume of inquietude for a mother's love; such a doubtful legacy for an heir so helpless and dependent), and at the future; and she prayed that when the eternal call should come it might be (by a week or so at the least) first for her child.

"Then, O Lord!" she prayed, "his own mother will be able to do for him to the very end, and nobody can treat him cruel, or handle him rough when his poor soul's fled. An' after that, O Lord!" she added, "You can take me any time it pleases You, for there'll be nothing to keep me down here.

"Not that I would 'ave You call of him immediate," she said with sudden apprehension, "for so long as You grant me strength to lift a finger I would ask nothing better than be let work for him, and look after him, and learn him to love me, where we are."

For she had her fears that his care might be relegated

into other hands above, and that others might continue in heaven the labour which she had inaugurated with so much love on earth. Scarcely, indeed, could her mother's eyes derive as great a satisfaction from the contemplation of him, a perfect being in heaven, as they did from the prospect of him, an imperfect mortal arrived at man's estate, with limbs untwisted by process of mortal growth, and a mouth to call her "Mother," and hands to turn the mangle, and lift the flat-iron from the hot grate, and a strength to carry forth the wicker wash-baskets, and eyes to distinguish shillings from sixpences and sixpences from ha'pennies, and a brain to reckon up wash-bills, count payments, and give change. When she heard the yard despatch its youngest, with coppers in one hand and a jug in the other, and a valedictory injunction to "Mind you look sharp, now, and don't stop nowheres on your way back, an' my word if you spill any——" her eyes kindled, and she gazed at the Will of God with tearfulness and pride.

"But it isn't them that goes there quickest," she assured herself, "that gets there safest in the end. What if their bairns can run arrands now, that's not no older than you, my precious! You'll run arrands some day, I'm as sure as sure, an' will help his mamma do her washing, an'—who knows!—p'raps be able to iron splendid."

Many creaking wash-baskets marked the march of time. The widow dwindled and the wash-baskets multiplied, and the yard developed in its own corporate fashion—a little more drink to this end; a little more drink to the other; a spell of teetotalism at No. 4;

a timely wedding at No. 6—and the Will of God grew. The wooden cradle on its low rockers was relegated to the parlour corner, a relic of the past for the worshipful eyes of memory to rest on, and its place was taken by a crib bedstead in green and gold that could contain the Will of God without risk of injury to his growth. The Will of God's eyes saw better ; the Will of God's ears heard better ; strength came into his legs, and with fearsome, crab-like motions, laying hold of the furniture with his arms to assist progression, the Will of God brought joy into his mother's heart, and crawled about her skirts as she stood at her ironing-table.

" Who'll run arrands now ! " she cried ecstatically when she saw him swarming from chair to chair, trailing his twisted legs. " Is there nobody's bairns to run arrands but theirs ? Yes, and to the post-office he shall go hisself, to take the money that belongs him, every penny of it. And that's a arrand none o' their bairns ever run, nor never will."

Still bigger grew the Will of God, and dearer to the widow's heart, though not less terrible to look upon. With a voice monstrous and misshapen like his body he could ejaculate hoarse cries that were words, born cripples in language as he had been born a cripple in humanity. Little by little, through the exigencies of his growth and movement, and through her pride in his person, the widow introduced her child to the yard again, as she had withdrawn him from its attentions years before.

" For why should mine be kep' hid in a dark room like a dog in its kennel," she would demand rebelliously, " whilst theirs is let to run about an' play in the

sunlight all day? God made sunlight for him as well as them—that made them all."

And, seated in his child's chair with a wooden lock-bar across his knees, the Will of God was set out to enjoy the beams of his Father's sunlight just behind the widow's open door, where the yard could see him by peeping, within sight of the widow's eye, and sound of her industrious iron, and the creak of her mangle. There, hour by hour, he would sit rolling his huge head in the sunlight that was his patrimony, gazing at the blue sky, and crooning the misshapen words that served him for expression of contentment. "Ah-oo, ah-oo, Ah-am-ah. Am-ah. Ay-ay-boo."

Here, in the first days of his reintroduction, the yard—if it did not come itself, under pretext of calling at the next house—would send infant emissaries to peer round the widow's door and bring back some sort of a thrill for the yard's marrow. And though the emissaries might reach the widow's door without her knowledge, she always knew when her child had been spied on, for, the object of their mission once attained, the missionaries made no concealment of the exuberance with which they ran back. At times she could hear the missionaries' reports cried half-way across the yard in the hot desire for their delivery; as also the yard's own voice, asking anxiously: "'Ave ye seed him?"

"'E's just aback o' door," the missionaries would state. "Set in chair."

"Lor'!" would cry the yard. "What's 'e a-doing on, Janie?"

"'E's a-wagging of his hands," the missionaries

would announce. Or, " 'E's a-going : ' Ah-oo ! Ah-oo ! ' " Or, " 'E's a-rolling of his head, round an' round an' round. Like this 'ere." And the missionaries would exemplify the action with such effect that the yard would say " Goodness ! It's enough to give a body the creeps. Mrs. Bayliss'm. 'Ere, Janie, show Mrs. Bayliss how he was doing when you seed him." Whereupon the missionary would exemplify once more, and, between pride in its own children and gruesome pity for the widow's one, the yard would pass many a pleasant and confraternal moment.

" Let 'em stare at you, my precious ! " the widow said, wiping the slobber from the idiot's mouth with a corner of the maternal apron. " Who's the worse for it but theirselves, that can stoop to act so low ? But we've got manners if they 'aven't, and good manners is good manners. They shan't rob us of our sunlight."

The terrors of teething were long since over, and merciful convulsions no more to be feared, but now a whole train of terrors assailed the widow with her Will of God, and the kindness of people—not yard-dwellers, but district visiting ladies and the benevolent —struck more dread to her heart than all the iron of the yard's hostility. With the mother's sense quick in her she had felt the fear atmospherically long before it assailed her through kind looks and sympathetic lips. While the Will of God had lain a helpless burden in his wooden cradle, people had joined their hopes with hers for his life and growth, for the strengthening of his limbs and the quickening of his faculties ; but now these hopes were realised, now that he could stand upon

his legs and say : "Ah-am-ah" and "Ay-ay-boo" and shake a child's rattle as clever as clever, and look at the birds on the water-spout so knowing you wouldn't believe, and was that strong in his arms he could almost lift the great steel fender—now that they saw all these things for themselves, instead of uniting their gladness with hers, they withheld it dubiously, by a species of troubled reticence that her maternal sense perceived brooding over their looks and words. Their eyes rested more sadly and doubtfully upon him the bigger and stronger he grew ; the cleverer the acts her pride had to recount of him, the less they were able to feign a joy. Something seemed to be closing around her and folding her in the embrace of an unseen, impalpable fear. Kind ladies whom she knew well, calling upon her to try and cajole some of the Will of God's money into the coffers of a parochial tea, would look at the man-sized idiot and sigh—would sigh ungratefully, even with a sixpence of his own savings in their morocco leather purses. The sigh, so curiously and ominously expended, went to the widow's heart.

"Bless you'm," she would tell the kind ladies with a voice of terror wrapped up in simulated cheer, "he's as good as gold, and as 'appy as the day is long. If I'd prayed for him to be what he is I couldn't have 'ad a better son, nor one that loves me more. Let me go out of his sight one minute an' he misses me, an' turns his 'ead when I come back.

"As for his speech," she said to them, "what by that? If 'e can't speak fair, 'e don't speak foul. An' what purpose does a many put their tongues to but to say things that they'd be a deal better if they couldn't

'a said, an' use words that ought never to be let soil a body's lips."

So in the mother's heart and the widow's argument there was not a defect in the Will of God whose virtue did not outweigh some vice to which its perfection would have entitled him. As an example of humanity on the negative principle he was, indeed, almost beyond criticism; for he neither drank, smoked, nor swore; neither grudged nor grumbled. But still kind people sighed officiously, and the unseen something tightened over the widow's heart.

Last of all the unseen fear took shape and a sound, that sent her hand under her breast as the sound of her dear husband's footsteps had done in the days when he would come home to enquire: "*Now* what are we a-hiding?" The kind ladies admitted the Will of God's growth to which she pointed with such a triumphant finger. He was growing. Oh, yes, wonderfully he was growing. But dear them! Whatever would she do with him when he got any bigger? However could she manage with him then—and all her washing into the bargain?

"Manage *with* him?" cried the widow. "Lor'm, however should I manage *without* him, you mean! If 'e wasn't set there, just where I could see 'im, I shouldn't be able to take no pleasure in my washing. He's only bit o' company I've got, for I haven't neither cat nor bird, an' good as gold he is."

The kind ladies were silenced but dissatisfied, for kindness will not "be said." They came again and looked upon the Will of God with gentle perplexity, and commended the widow for her devotion in tones which were more than half a reproof for the folly of

exceeding one's duty. Such a slender, delicate woman as she was. They were quite sure she was not strong enough for all she undertook. She ought not to do it; she oughtn't really. He was growing far bigger than she could handle. Did she not think it would be far wiser—and better, now—to let the Will of God be properly taken care of, in a beautiful place where there were doctors and kind trained attendants ready to hand, and lovely gardens for the Will of God to walk about in, and seats to sit down on, and games to play? Where he would be taught to do lots of clever things, such as brush-making, and re-seating cane-bottomed chairs, and sweeping corridors, and learn to be really useful and happy? Where she could go and see him once or twice a year?

Wouldn't that be far better for him, and infinitely better for her? Wouldn't it, now?

The widow's face turned as ghastly a grey as it had done when she went to meet trouble at the door after her husband's interview with the angel, and she set down the iron with a trembling hand. Anger was under her lips, and but for the years of discipline in the hard school of the will of God all her maternal resentment might have burst out against Kindness in words more startling than her pallor, but she only said, with the meekness of obstinacy: "You're very kind'm, but whilst I'm alive an' able to do a stroke he shall never go there."

"Of course, he would be well taken care of," said Kindness.

"Not better than *I*'ve took care of him all these years," said the widow quietly.

" And you would have the consolation of knowing," said Kindness, " that he was being very kindly treated."

" Not so kind'm," returned the widow, " as his own mother treats him."

Every argument that Kindness advanced was gently but firmly repelled by the frail woman with the forceful flat-iron, that was almost, it seemed, the source of her strength.

" Kindness," said Kindness (in reference to the widow's fatuous devotion), " may be mistaken kindness at times, Mrs. Ephraim."

" Other people's kindness may be mistaken too'm," said the widow, with such resignation that Kindness could scarcely realise this resignation was sheer rebellion. " And if a mother's hard put to it at times to know what's best to do for her own, how is it likely she can trust strangers to know any better? " The strain of her humility, too long sustained, and the tension of their dread arguments, suddenly overcame her self-possession again, and, setting down the flat-iron once more, she pressed an almost supplicative hand to her bosom. Tears of shame and apprehension stung her worn eyes and dropped down upon the ironing cloth.

" I beg'm," she implored in a half-broken voice, " that you'll never mention such a thing to me again, for it makes me bad to think of it. You do it out of kindness, I know, and I'm very grateful; but if he was yours you'd p'raps think different. 'E was sent to me, and with me 'e shall stop. If Almighty had intended 'im to go into a 'sylum He'd 'a sent him there Hisself. Lor'm! The idea of sending 'im to a 'sylum—as if

he was a idiot ! What would my own neighbours think of me if I was to do such a thing ?

" It's not a bit o' use," she sobbed. " I couldn't do it if it was ever so, and I beg you won't ask me again."

Kindness departed with all the dignity befitting frustration, and though Kindness returned again—particularly at parochial tea times—Kindness was never quite the same. After but a brief period of comparative peace with the world she crept back into her own shrinking heart as into a refuge, distrustful of everybody but herself, and her dearer than self in his child's chair.

" They would take you from me, my precious, if they could ! " she said, wiping his mouth with her solicitous apron, and kissing his great loose lips. " I know it, for that's what they mean. They don't say : ' Mrs. Ephraim, you ought to give up your washing so as you could look better after your child.' They say : ' Mrs. Ephraim, you ought to give up your child so as you can look better after our washing.' But never you fear, my precious, for as long as your mamma has strength left to lift a iron she shan't let you be took from her. She shan't." The fear of Kindness sank into her soul. At her ironing-table ; at the mangle ; at home ; or hugging the creaky wicker wash-baskets along the street, the formula was never far from her lips ; was always hovering near them, ready to take possession when her mind was off its guard, and make them mutter : " They would take 'im away from me if they could. They would take 'im away from me if they could."

Waiting for payment at kitchen doors and in

draughty passages while maids verified the returns by the wash-book, she would beguile the moments with thoughts of home and of the Will of God, and would wrestle desperately with this threatening terror as though by mental victory she could gain lasting peace for her soul and safety for her son.

" Not while I've strength to lift a iron ! " she would resolve, in such vehemence of thought that the words were swept off her lips along with it, to her own red dismay and the returning maid's astonishment. More than one pedestrian in the street, shouldering this frail woman with her clothes-basket as she passed by, would be surprised to hear a solitary word, blurted out passionately above its fellows of the mind : " Shan't ! " or " Iron ! " or " If they could ! " But drunken washerwomen are traditional, and they cared, after one look round, no more about her. Drink and trouble have this in common, that they both make their sufferers ridiculous. Hence what matter the cause, since the consequences are the same ? The widow, fleeting through the streets with her wash-basket, her wild eye, and her incontinent lip, was as drunk to outward semblance in her own degree as her dear dead husband had been in his. Even the yard, watching its neighbour stumble her way homeward, muttering while she set down the wash-basket outside her house, and muttering while she opened the door—even the yard was moved to make enquiry confidentially behind a corner of its apron :

" Do you think, Mrs. Bayliss, that she's started to take anything ? "

" Why, now, I 'ave wondered a time or two," said

the yard's confidant. "She looks that altered from what she was," the yard explained. "An' it soon makes a change in anybody."

"Partic'lar when a body hasn't been brought up to it," added the confidant.

"And 'as 'ad a deal o' trouble to go through first. It shows," said the yard, "sooner in them 'at takes to it through trouble than in them 'at takes to it just out o' pleasure, as you might say."

Courage, widow! Courage and faith!

What matter it that the eye of the yard is upon you? God's eye is upon you too, and if the yard's eye read you wrong His eye will surely read you right. What matter that the yard says: "I would just like, now, to be able to have an excuse for lifting cloth off of yon basket!" God knows that there is nothing beneath it but the cuffs and collars, the shirts, vests, unmentionables, and the wash-book. What matter that each time the sound of your vigorous iron ceases the yard's ear is alert at the ensuing silence, and that when your iron recommences after a while, or your voice breaks into contented song—even a quavering hymn—the yard exchanges significant looks and says: "Now, what did she stop for then, I wonder! Not for a new iron, for she's nobbut just taken last one up." What matters all this? It is not calumny that can hurt you, but kindness. Calumny only seeks to relieve you of your character, but kindness would rob you of your son. And the Will of God, written in the flesh and sealed in the bone, is a still more terrible proclamation than any that kindness or calumny can devise.

For now, with every inch added to his stature,

another terror was recruited to the widow's legions. Out of sight in their invisible fastnesses beyond the reach of prayers or tears, the remorseless workmen of God built up, cell by cell, the earthly monument of affliction that was her son. They built his knees close up to the wooden bar, and his body so big that the wooden arms of the child's chair could no longer contain it. The chair went the way of the cradle, and the widow—a helpless spectator of his growth—viewed with apprehension this passing away of childish things. Daily he grew heavier to lift and handle. But worse than that; daily the inexorable builders raised him more perceptibly above the early scaffolding of childish contentment. Predilections and aversions began to stand out from the structure like buttresses. With his strong arms he could have turned a dozen mangles all day, but a fatal gleam of intelligence had led him once to investigate the mystery of the rollers. The rollers had bitten a finger, and he hated the mangle thereafter with an unconquerable hatred. Even the sound of its labouring creak, gorged with wet linen that it drew into its wide mouth and masticated to the sound of the widow's gasps, roused all his slumbering ire. He would turn a face swollen with anger towards the iron beast that had once bitten him, crying: "Ah-oo! Ah-oo! O-ah-oo!" in mingled wrath and supplication.

"But, my precious!" the widow strove to reassure him. "Mangle didn't mean to hurt 'im, it didn't. Mangle wouldn't hurt nobody, mangle wouldn't, least of all my precious. Where would his mamma be now if she 'adn't mangle to help her? It is a good mangle.

Beautiful mangle it is, that wrings clothes drier than nobody could ever squeeze 'em with their fingers. He must try an' like mangle, he must. He must try an' be friends with mangle."

But all her suasion was powerless to move his prejudice, or to reinstate the mangle in his good opinion. When she tried to coax him to the machine, to show him how good, and quiet, and tractable the great beast was, his voice rose instantly to such a pitch of terror and resentment that she was constrained to shut the scullery door upon her offending wringer, and pacify his anger before it should excite the comment of the yard. What with Kindness on the one hand, and the Will of God on the other—that seemed determined, despite his mother's prayer, to betray them both into the hands of the enemy—the widow's heart was stored with more horrors than a devout priesthood has imputed to Purgatory. If grief be cleansing, as some say, the widow's soul must surely have been whiter than her own white starch work so universally commended. For now her soul never knew peace. Her dear drunken husband had possessed but one step to stand in fear of; Kindness had a dozen. Her dear drunken husband had never trespassed upon her terrors for more than a few minutes at a time. Kindness would stay half an hour. And in that half-hour her cheek was red and white by turns with apprehension of a possible betrayal. Between the automatic "Yes'm" and "No'm" of her nervous lips her ears were strained to catch the first restless creak of the Will of God's displeasure. For his temper was fitful as the lightning. Sometimes silence and sometimes

sound would be the cause of his inarticulate anger. Sometimes bread and butter alone would placate the clamorous wrath of his "Ah-oo! Ah-oo!" At other moments he would dash the bread and butter to the floor and crow with seraphic delight over substituted bread and treacle. Now he would drink but tea; anon, only milk. Not even his mother that loved him could be sure of his requirements until these had been tested by the fires of his anger, or approved by his glee. And his mother's authority became powerless, save in the things that pleased him. Bit by bit she saw the vanishment of her old-time hopes. Here was no errand-runner. Here was no ironer. Here was no accountant of change and giver of receipts. Here was only an afflicted son to be screened from the world's kindness, and to be kept out of that dread destination to which Kindness would consign him. The very sound of his voice, that had once been the pleasure of her heart to hear, and the joy of her lips to waken, was a menace to her now—who never knew how swiftly it might rise into a semi-scream of anger. She never seated him in these days so near the door but that she could close it hurriedly on occasion, as though a loose door with a keyhole in it could keep back from the yard what brick walls had never withheld.

"Oh, hush, hush, my precious!" she would exhort the swollen face of purple wrath, shaking a beseechful finger at him. "Hush, hush! for God's sake, or they'll be taking you from me to shut you up among mad folk, and break your mother's heart!"

She was as mad, with love fermented, as her child. Her lips shook the day long with tremulous sentences

framed mentally for his defence and his protection against invisible Kindness. "As good as gold he is." "Never gives his mother a wrong word." "'Asn't a bit of temper about him; it's his way of asking for things." The air surrounding her was full of ears. Curtains could not be starched stiff enough, or drawn sufficiently close to withstand the penetration of Kindness's eyes. They were being spied on, the two of them, and the widow knew it. Let her snatch but a look out into the yard at any hour of the day, and there was the yard watching her intently from its doors.

"Aye! There you are!" said the yard at the pallid apparition of the widow's face, wild and furtive. "Third time since break'ast. What does a body want to peep so oftens round her door for?"

"If there wasn't somethink in it," said the yard, "she'd come out respectable, and stand on step same as we're doing. You don't pop *your* 'ead out an' pull it in again, missus, nor yet me. When you come out you're ready to stop a good ten minutes—or 'alf an hour, if need be—and let folks see you're not frightened o' being looked at."

"Ellen! Just you sit 'ere, now, and nurse your brother 'Erbit on doorstep. An' if Mrs. Ephraim looks out again, run in an' tell your ma like a good girl. She needn't think she's going to look at other folks without other folks looking back, so she knows."

So she knew. Courage, widow; so the widow knew. With a hand to her heart, and not to the bottle of which the yard suspected her, the widow knew that she was being watched for her son's removal; as the yard

knew she was drowning her sorrows in the liquor feloniously disguised under the label of "Washing Ammonia."

"They mean to take you from me, my precious!" she moaned. "I see it in their eyes. Oh, hush, hush, my pet! For every time you use your voice they begrudge you, and say 'Hark at him ravin'.' If they was to see you drop your bread and butter that I'd handed to you clumsy, they'd say you was flinging it down in temper. They'd say anything to spite you. They're jealous of the very air you breathe, as though it had been robbed from their own childer; an' they're jealous of me because I work 'ard, and put by my bit o' money, and don't spend none of it on drink."

Many wash-baskets, Kindness, Calumny, and the Will of God had done their work. Her strength was ebbing, and she knew it The hand that rose now and then to press her troubled temple rose in unsteady perplexity, as though on an undecided errand, and unsure of its way. The iron trembled in her weakened grasp and slipped persistently. Her sight began to fail, and did not always show her the tell-tale scorch marks until her nose had smelt them. Collars were sent back; they were too stiff. Collars were sent back; they were too limp. Sheets were sniffed at; they were too blue. Kindness said it was only kindness to complain and point out these deficiencies so that she might rectify them, and in this way Kindness was kinder than ever. She must try and do better than this, Kindness told her. Evidently she was taking in more work than she could properly manage. This was

not the sort of washing Kindness was accustomed to. This would never do. If she were not very careful she would be having complaints.

She said she was sorry'm, she was sure. Very, very sorry she was, and she would try better in future if they would let her. Kindness undertook to let her, though reluctantly; for as Kindness said, when a woman was getting too old for her work, it was mistaken kindness to give her any work to do. Moreover, Kindness had not failed to note the palsied hand that trembled beneath the burden of one rejected collar; or the unsteady lip, always restless, apparently, to break from control and resume its uninterrupted mutterings; nor had Kindness failed to catch some of the whisperings that poisoned the air about the widow's door. "One has no right to accuse anybody —without good proof," said Kindness compassionately. "But really, what *is* one to think? And, of course, the poor woman has had such trouble. Still, one's collars must come first. And if she *is* giving way one would be doing wrong to encourage her."

So the wash-baskets that had multiplied in time decreased; and those that had fattened grew lean—mere skeletons of washing, displaying little but their wasted wicker ribs. Diminished though they were in size and number, they taxed the widow's dwindling strength more than their prosperous predecessors had done. Frequently she would have to pause, with one sustaining hand on the brickwork and the other beneath her fluttering breast, the washing at her feet meanwhile, before she could recover sufficient strength to use the key and let herself in through her own door.

"Why don't you take a drop of something'm?" the yard was constrained to advise her on one occasion, moved commiserately by the sight of her obvious distress. "It would p'raps do you good."

The widow, terrified by anything approaching Kindness, seized her key and applied it desperately to the lock.

"Thank you'm," she answered breathlessly, "but I couldn't touch nothing of that sort if it was ever so."

"As though she thinks we're as soft as her own bairn!" commented the yard. "Lord, it makes one fair angry to think of such deceitfulness. An' her poor 'and that unsteady while it could scarcely find way to keyhole!"

"It's a bad look-out when folks starts to deny it."

"You're right, missus, for they don't give a body chance to 'elp 'em, or do nothink."

"She might think," added another of the yard's many voices, "that we was wanting to 'elp her drink it. Dear me! She needn't be scared, *she* needn't. What drop I take (an' it's very little) I can pay for."

But there was stronger corroboration than the widow's distressed breathing or unsteady gait or trembling hand, for one day she appeared before the yard with a discoloured eye. The yard was in a ferment over this.

"Lor', Mrs. Ephraim!" it cried, at this revised apparition of the phantom washerwoman, staggering beneath her ghost of a basket. "What a eye you've gotten to be sure! What *'ave* you been a-doing at yourself?"

"A bit of a tumble'm, that's all," the phantom

figure responded in a phantom and evasive voice. "It don't signify, thank you. I shall be all right in a day or two."

She sped forth, the old fugitive again, but she left the yard behind her. The yard had not done with her eye. Black eyes, though not infrequent, were not to be dismissed or obliterated in that summary fashion.

"A bit of a tumble!" exclaimed the yard. "A bit of a tumble, my word! Did you ever! Why, what sort of a tumble must it 'a been, now, to catch her eye like that?"

"She must 'a fell 'eavy," said the yard.

"Again' the table-edge, or fender, by looks on it," reflected the yard. "It hasn't been no mere slip. She's fell all 'er length to get an eye like that."

"Aye! The fender, as like as not. A mercy her eye was spared. She might 'a blinded herself. An' she never touches nothing. Wouldn't if it was ever so. My word!"

"She'll get folks to believe that. *She's* no excuse for such an eye, she 'asn't. Her husband's been dead this going on twenty year. She hasn't got no husband to blame, like some folk."

The widow took her eye for Kindness and the World to look at (and the latter looked at it the more kindly and leniently of the two), for this particular Kindness had told her that it had no more washing for her *this* week, and the yard was still there when she came home. She strove to flit by in a breathless feint of haste, but the yard had thrown off all dissimulation of unfriendliness, and was growing openly and cruelly kind.

" Excuse me, Mrs. Ephraim mum," the yard accosted her, " but did you say you'd got your eye again' chair-back or fender ? Mrs. Smith says chair-back, but I rather understood you to say fender."

The widow stumbled with a wan cry of apprehension against her own door and turned round upon her interrogators with the wild face of a beast at bay.

" I know what you want," she panted, " with your chair-backs an' fenders, that I never breathed a word about to you nor yet to nobody. But it wasn't him that did it, for all you think it was. It wasn't him, an' so I tell you. Do you think he'd raise a hand again' his own mother, that's done everything for 'im since he was a bairn ? " She burst into tears, blindly groping for the keyhole with a trembling finger. " You won't rest until you've got 'im took from me. You mean to 'ave 'im took from me ; 'im that's never done no harm to you nor nobody, least of all his own mother, nor never would. You want to see 'im took away, and locked up, and me put in my coffin. That's what you want, and that you won't rest while you get." Her agitated finger found the keyhole at last, and she let herself into the house from the yard's sight, amid a gust of dissident tears.

" Lord 'a me ! " cried the yard, staring at the swiftly closed door. " Who spoke a word about bairn ? Bairn wouldn't 'a sense enough to hit nobody if it tried. A nice idea it is for her to try an' drag bairn into it, it is indeed ; as if bairn hadn't enough trouble of his own to carry, without none of hers shifted on to 'im ! "

" Missus ! " the yard told itself. " She's not fit to

'ave charge o' nobody like him, so 'elpless and dependent as he is. Goodness knows what she'll be letting 'appen him some of these days. As like as not she'll be knocking lamp over and setting both of 'em on fire."

"Somebody ought to be told of her goings-on," another mouthpiece proclaimed. "I declare it's not safe for folk to live in a yard gain-hand her. We shall all be getting burned in our beds some of these fine days."

And behind her door, betwixt tears and terror, the widow poured out her soul to the Will of God, and exhorted the son that had struck her. Yes, exhorted the son that had dashed out of her hands the soap and washbowl that were to make him clean and struck with his mad fist the eye that had never looked on him with anything but love.

"They know it!" she cried to him. "They've spied on us, and listened on us, till nothing's hid from them. As though you was to blame, my precious. I ought to 'a set washing bowl on chair same as I've always set'n it, and not brought it round when you wasn't expecting. Do they think *I* care about a bit of a black eye? Not me. I'd be glad of anything *you* gave me, my precious. I'm only sorry you couldn't kick me, if so be God had though fit to give you full use o' your legs. For your fist and feet's softer than their kind words. Hush, then! Oh, hush, then, lovey, for God only gave you a voice so as to make 'em jealous of you. Every time they 'ear you they say it's not safe for an old woman like me to be left alone with you. 'Let him be took away from her,' they say, 'before he works more mischief.' For the only folks that is to be

let work mischief is theirselves, that's got the use of their faculties, and does it on purpose—not them like you that does their bit of harm by accident."

Everything gives way to the ravages of time and trouble but that one unconquerable quality—love. She was tottering to her grave beneath the burden of a single thought—a mammoth wash-basket of thought, more insubstantial, but infinitely heavier, than all the line of fat wash-baskets that had gone before. What was to become of the Will of God? Who was to look after him when she was gone? Even when her strength was scarce equal to lifting the flat-irons from the fire, and when Kindness with one mind would not trust her to use it on any but other people's linen, her trembling resolution adhered to its formula.

" So long as I've strength to lift a iron you shall never go there, my precious. So long as I've strength to lift a finger you shall never go there. And pray God, when you're took it shall be by Him, not by them, so as your mamma can see to you loving and respectable, and can follow immediate. Your mammy doesn't mind what road she's put away when *her* time comes. She's had plenty of hard words an' ill usage in her life, when she could feel it most, and did, but you never have, an' never shall, so long as she can stretch a hand against it."

Kindness came and assailed her with suggestions about parochial relief. She was not so feeble, or so near the grave, that there was not blood in her, mortal enough, to rise indignantly to her cheeks. So long as she had strength to lift a finger she would work for a living. After that she was not without something for

the rainy day. And, please God, when the sun came out again it might find the two of them in another country—the far and beautiful land to which her dear husband had emigrated more than twenty years ago.

"She is the sort of woman," Kindness said, in speaking of her, "that you cannot do anything for." Kindness was, indeed, quite angry in saying this; though had the widow been of the other class of women, Kindness would have said with severity: "Well, you see, Mrs. Ephraim, you can't expect people to be *always* doing for you." Perhaps, however, the surest way to make Kindness angry is to take it at its word.

In this direction the widow did not err. She asked for nothing, and though people who ask for anything generally get less than they want, and the widow consequently got less than her nothing—which was of course, something; and that something the undesired attentions of Kindness—still, it was as near nothing as any suppliant for that particular form of relief could reasonably expect. Kindness supplied her with a little inconsequential washing—dust-sheets and coarse aprons, that she gasped over as laboriously as she had done over the heaviest wash-basket of fine linen, and yet, for all her gasping, failed to fetch clean. Her eye for colour was indeed quite extinct. Blue, drab, or dirty were all one to her, it seemed. She was no longer a laundress; she was a charwoman whose work makes as much dirt as it cleanses; always behind-hand, even with the little work she had; always reading alarm from the clock—a gasp for every glance at the stern face that makes no allowance for the shortcomings of age and breathing; always flurried.

" Lord, them irons ! "—and a dash to the fire. ' Lord, them aprons ! "—and a dash to withdraw the clothes-horse farther from the fender. " Lord, bairn ! " —and a crazy dash to perform some accustomed service for the Will of God. And, above all, the supreme fear of Kindness and its sinister designs.

In her terror of exciting the anger of the Will of God and drawing upon them both the dread warrant that Kindness only awaited some pretext to execute, she conceded everything to her son. The caprice of the idiot was inviolable as God's own law ; no sacrifices were too great to propitiate this despotic deity whose wrath, once roused, could wreak such revenge upon her mother's heart. Only once since the incident of the blackened eye had she dared to approach the idiot's tabernacle with her timid offering of soap and water At once the sanctuary rang with his displeasure.

" Oh, hush, hush, my precious ! " she cried, hurrying the offending tribute from her divinity's sight. " Oh, hush, I beg you ! I didn't do it for to make you angry. I didn't indeed. You shan't be washed, you shan't, if you don't wish it. Other folks' bairns goes dirty ; why shouldn't you ? You've as much right as them."

He refused to suffer her to undress him. At the best of times the task had been no light one, but now, even with the deity's sanction, it was almost beyond the widow's powers. The instant she heard the first threatening note of divine anger she was smitten with mortal penitence.

" Oh, hush, hush ! " she begged of the swelling face and the purpling, wrathful lips, all awry and bloated. " You shan't have 'em took off if you're comfortabler

with 'em on. Your father has slep' in his things many a night, my precious, when he was alive, an' shall you be let do less than him? Not while your mamma's strength to lift a iron, or keep you by her, you shan't."

But not all a mother's sacrifices in the world could satisfy the extortionate wilfulness of the Will of God. For each of the greater points surrendered he substituted immediately a lesser point endowed with all the horrors, observances, and penalties of its capitulated predecessor. The Will of God was no longer an afflicted human; he was a reckless divinity, rolling riotously down the celestial road to ruin. Anger was fast becoming his chief indulgence; terrible manifestations of divine wrath complicated the widow's piety at every end and turn. Out of his sleep the Will of God would waken with the convulsive face of passion, grow purple to the lips, and ejaculate hoarse cries that not all his mother's religious devotion could interpret. Like a prophet she would stand, tearful and terrified, before this demonstration of her deity, and know not how to translate the message of his righteous anger. The divinity visited her with plagues. In a paroxysm of wrath he seized a basketful of inconsequential washing and cast the contents upon the fire. She thanked God, now, that what had once seemed a misfortune was less of a misfortune than her wavering faith had understood.

"Lord be praised," she gasped, in her breathless labour of salvage, "that there's nothing I can't replace." Even now the deity was unappeased. His wrath, fully aroused, was unsleeping and unsatisfied. The widow, weak, white-faced, and trembling, dared

scarcely leave him for a moment. The lust of destruction was hot in him. His great arms—those fearsome strongholds of his misappropriated strength—swept the floor for objects to rive and rend. His wry and bloated lips snarled in despotic rage when his mother's feeble haste forestalled him, and robbed him of his rightful prey. Such a deity requires all heaven and the infinite for his disportment; not the crabbed confines of a widow's kitchen-parlour. His visitations, scattered broadside through a universe, would have been magnificent, overwhelming. Nations, bowing down in terror before the awful manifestations of their god, might have sustained his trials and profited by his chastenings; but they were too lavish for one lorn widow. For now he rarely slept; and now she dared not. There are limits, even to a mother's love; not limits of love, but limits of folly on which she feeds it. No longer could the widow sustain her love on the follies of hope with which her larder had been so lavishly provisioned in the past. The larder was bare. She knew that Kindness was right; that Kindness's kindness was the true kindness, and hers the false. Only the twisted uselessness of his legs withheld the Will of God from being a divinity at large, a menace to the world, and a breaker of his mother's heart. She knew it, but for all her knowledge he was still her son, and his mother loved him. Her only thought was to save him from the true kindness, and to shield him with the false.

And who knows how much longer she might have succeeded in her unequal combat? Who knows but that her prayer might have been granted, and that

she might have survived her son by the few days requisite for his decent preparation and burial, had she not transgressed too flagrantly the iron laws of the will of God? Was her maternity the least excuse for the last folly which cost her the fruits of all those follies planted in the past for her son's ultimate protection, shelter, and sustainment? Was not the wrath of her deity articulate enough, that she should so ignore it with her mother's love? Because her watchfulness had forestalled him and frustrated him in the past of what his hands unwisely desired, was that any ground for seeking to dispossess him of what his hands had seized already, and grasped in their iron grip?

None. She knew he was a deity, and she but a poor, weak mortal. And yet, for fear of Kindness, she dared him. And are we to profess surprise that the Will of God, who was one day—in the widow's foolish aspiration—to iron as clever as clever, should begin his ironing now, and iron out his mother's life upon her own fender?

If so, we have been as negligent in our reading of the page of Providence as the widow herself.

For that was the end of her, and the consummation of the will of God—that her own son should bestow upon her the peace that the world could not give. From her place in heaven now, by her beatific husband's side, she would see the inexorable working of the will which her foolish earthly love had tried to frustrate and defraud. She would see—after witnessing the stir and turmoil in the yard; the wringing of afflicted aprons; the shedding of distracted tears; the convulsions of a whole neighbourhood over the

last disposal of her poor remains—she would see the Will of God, her own dear son—dear in heaven as on earth, and loved no less—conveyed to the great mansion of brick and iron and barred windows whither cruel Kindness had planned and schemed to send him in the days of her mortality, and where it was plainly God's will—had not her blind and wayward love rebelled against it—that he should be sent.

And there, amid other hundreds of Wills of God, the widow would see her son safely shut away from the world into which he was born ; where there are doctors and kind trained attendants, and seats to sit down on ; there to fulfil the object for which he was created, and to take his appointed part in the all-wise mechanism of the Great Purpose.

The Slate

I KNOW what trouble is. I have been brought up to it. Nay, I have been bred and born to it. Trouble was my mother's name before she was married, and misfortune nursed me. A wet nurse she was. As a infant I have been took out regular every Saturday evening when it rained, to the tune of "Abide With Me" and the sound of dropped coppers. Long before I could lisp the hymn I knew the distinctive smell of it, and I could tell ha'pence from pennies by the fall of them before I had the use of my legs—though these latter was called for active service early.

I have been, in successive pairs of trousers that was never intended for me, nor yet for any like me, a locked-out collier; a starving grinder; a puddler; a brass finisher; a boilermaker; and everythink in this mortal world that was distressed or needy. And more. I have lost my right arm in a colliery explosion, and has known what it was, for three months, to be reduced to beg with the left. The medical faculty has discharged me from every hospital in London with an incurable hip; and in conjunction with one other I have been a shipwrecked sailor wearing a white calico jacket which had his leg took off through a fatal collision in the North Sea. Aye, it was a mistake we ever parted company, him and me, but we did it in a evil hour, and I takes to a quiet, respectable side-door and garden-walk practice.

I couldn't have took to nothing worse, by what it seemed. The side-door and garden-walk practice was in a bad way. A starving wife and three small children did nothink to resuscitate it. Starving wives and famishing infants was a drug in the market.

I remember being told once by a teetotal-looking gentleman: "My friend," says he, "you talk too much. True suffering has far less to say for itself. I keep my money for the silent and the deserving." It was as heartless a saying as ever I've heard; and one day, when I was tired of opening gates respectful and shutting them after me with a slam, the saying comes back to my despondent memory.

"My friend," says I to myself, "you talk too much. Good. We'll be silent and deserving."

Aye, what a thing it is to lose your faculties! What a thing it is to be brought down to a broken slate and a stub of pencil, as though you was a sum in arithmetic that nobody wants to haddle up! To be dependent on a slate for all you wants and never gets; to have to scratch your way through life on capital letters that does their best to slide over the slate-edge and dodge you. Put yourself in the position for a day; for a hour, even; and you'll never forget the meaning of the word affliction.

For three months I had been without speech or hearing, and it was beginning to look as though my hard case was beyond the skill of earthly physicians, when one eventful day a incident occurred which played a important part in my exchequered career. I had just failed in a valorous effort to introduce my sad misfortune to a red-faced old gentleman with a

obese umbrella, when another old gentleman draws up to us with a interested look which experience has taught me is generally worth cultivating. Already I had acknowledged his attention with a respectful bow, and was rubbing a surface on my slate as a humble preliminary, when somethink familiar about his way of looking at me caused me to scrutinise him more particular than heretofore. As I fastened my hopeful eye upon him, his smile, which had begun by being benevolent, opened out like a front door and revealed a somethink behind it of a sinister and disquieting nature.

Misfortune quickens the intelleck, and though I had neither my speech nor my hearing—as the slate could testify—I had a remembrance that bit like a asp, and that now rose and stung me out of the melancholy undergrowth of the blighted past. I gripped my pencil and nerved myself for the sceptic struggle which seemed impending, keeping the smile under observation, meanwhile, for what should come of it.

"Aye!" says he, after a time, "the recollection appears to be mutual. I think me and you's met before, my good friend."

I looks at his lips and shakes my head helpless. Then I licks my pencil and holds it up for him to see, and writes slowly on the slate:

"KIND SIR, I AM DEAF AND DUMB."

He looks at that and he looks at me, and I looks at that and looks at him. Sometimes his smile shuts narrow, and my heart beats; sometimes it opens wide, and my works seems stopping. As though affliction (multiplied by two) wasn't bitter enough in

a man's cup but what it must be poisoned by a unworthy suspicion!

"Come," says he; "was you never at ——. And didn't I give you a bit of advice which you seem to have took rather too literal?"

I licks the pencil again, incomprehending, and writes on the slate:

"ABIDE WITH ME. ROCK OF AGES. HELP THE HELPLESS."

He looks at that and looks at me again, and I looks at that and looks at him. Then he makes an imperious gesture with his hand for the pencil and pounces like a hawk on the slate.

"How long have you been deaf and dumb?" he writes.

When I had spelled it out I took the pencil once more and answered:

"PARDON THE LIBERTY. EVER SINCE 12½ YEARS."

Quick as light he writes below it:

"What was the cause?"

I reclaimed the pencil and wrote very careful and respectful:

"NATURAL CAUSES AGGRAVATED BY NEGLECT. A GOOD GIVER IS THE GIFT OF GOD. THANK YOU, KIND SIR."

He runs his eye over this and seems to think. Then he asks me a whole slateful of questions such as: "What is your name?" "What was your occupation prior to being afflicted?" "Where was you born?" etc. These I answers to his aperient satisfaction, and he writes:

"Are you looking for work?"

"KIND SIR," I writes back, "I AM LOOKING FOR ASSISTANCE. HE WHO GIVES TO THE POOR LENDETH TO THE LORD. I WILL PRAY FOR YOU."

"Very well then," says he, all of a sudden, handing back the pencil and the slate. "Follow me."

And with that he walks away.

If I had had a innocent and confiding heart I might have followed him, but affliction and experience is hard schoolmasters, and barbs the natural instincts with suspicion. I stood where I was, rubbing the slate slowly clean with a sorrowful hand, and looking after him with a enquiring eye. Why, I cannot explain, but there was somethink about his walk, somethink snakelike about the circular movements of his philanthropic legs, somethink I feel unable to describe, which was not creditable to grey hairs nor to venerable old age. If he had turned the corner I should have removed my afflictions in a contrairy direction, and scorned to have presumed further on a charity which my heart told me was grudged, but just as I was making ready to slip the slate up my waistcoat he looked round with a ill-disguised pretence of having missed me, and, seeing where I was still standing, he beckoned of me with a impatient hand. There was nothink for it but to do his behest. I withdrew the slate again from its repository, and, writing as I walked, approached him with:

"DO YOU WANT ME, KIND SIR?"

"Follow me!" he writes, and leads the way again—this time with a eye over his shoulder. It was a eye that, as we proceeded, kept showing unpleasantly on each side of his head, like the bulge of a policeman's

lantern. He walked with a quick step, and more than once I was hoping he would outdistance me, for affliction goes slower than them that's blessed with all their faculties, and good fortune beside, but whenever I lagged the eye stood out again ominous, and drew me up to it.

Well I remember the walk and the day. It was a morning in August, and the sun burned overhead like—aye, like fire. Yet the old gentleman stepped out with the briskness of December, and plied a walking-stick with a vigour which spoke volumes for his state of health. He led me under the chins of half a dozen constables and close by a police-station with my heart in my mouth, but beyond giving a extra look round at me he never stopped, and I begun to breathe free. Walking thus, it was not long before we leaves the busy thoroughfares behind us and comes to a rich residential quarter of the town, where the old gentleman led the way up a crunching gravel drive that had been beautifully raked and weeded. We skirts the front door and goes round by some stabling, and up some steps at the back, and through a lofty hall into what I should suppose was a study, for it smelt of smoke, and was lined with fine books in glass cases. Here the old gentleman beckons me through the door with a quick movement of his hand, and, bending respectful at the stomach, I steps across the mat, being careful not to tread on it. As soon as I was inside he held out both hands for the slate and pencil and wrote: "Sit down."

I sits down on the edge of a chair and looks respectfully uncomfortable.

"Are you hungry?" he writes.

I writes: "KIND SIR, HUNGRY AND VERY THIRSTY. IT IS THE HEAT. GOD BLESS YOU."

He writes back:

"Wait here."

There I sits, without moving a inch, and trying to curb my eye to a proper gaze of affliction, until, after some time, I hears steps and voices, and the old gentleman returns to the study accompanied by another and younger party, years less venerable, and in every way more disquieting to the eye of trouble. He looks at me without so much as a nod, as if I was a ox in a stall and him a butcher. I don't know why, but instinctive I begun to perspire at sight of this person. To say my mouth was dry, it was incredible the quantity of liquid on call elsewhere about me. My clothes stuck to my body with a embrace which would not be denied. I was wet through.

"Well, here's your man," said the old gentleman. "What do you think of him?"

"Stone deaf, is he?" asks the younger party, without replying to the question.

"So I believe. You're stone deaf, aren't you?" the old gentleman asks of me in turn, and then, suddenly remembering himself: "Here, lend me your slate. We've got to write it all down. Are you stone deaf? If so, nod your head."

I nods my head, with misgivings.

"And dumb?" asked the younger party once more, with a careless and unsympathetic voice, rattling some loose coins in his trousers' pocket—coppers by the sound of them, with a matchbox and some keys.

" Quite dumb ? " writes the old gentleman. " If so, nod your head."

I nods my head, with more misgivings.

" Let's have a look at his throat," said the younger party, taking a evil white hand out of his pocket and advancing. " Tell the merchant to open his mouth."

The old gentleman transfers this request to the slate.

" He wishes to look at your throat. Open your mouth."

I gives a hunted look at the old gentleman and the younger party, and half rises from the edge of the chair. I was now all misgivings from head to foot, and still growing. There seemed somethink awful in the way them two draws round me, as though they was the deadly noose of Fate. The younger party comes up square to me and gives a arbitrary upward jerk of his thumbs like opening a invisible window-sash, as much as to say :

" Now ! Open with you."

All of a tremble I opens. He grips my jaw and the back of my head with hands of iron, and, wrenching my mouth as wide as it would go, he twists me about in all directions and fixes a terrifying glance to what's inside of me. Instinctively I clasps my hands together and rolls them supplicatively in the pit of my stomach, but he looks regardless till I feel his gaze boring through my inmost vitals like a red-hot poker.

" Well ? " says the old gentleman.

The younger party snaps my jaws together like a handbag and rubs his hands as though he had been touching dirt.

" Well," says he, " it's as dangerous a case as ever I clapped my eyes on, but it's worth trying."

" And you really think," asks the old gentleman, " there's a chance of restoring both speech and hearing ? "

" There's a chance," says the younger party. " Yes. I won't say it's much of a chance, but it *is* a chance."

" And you propose to operate ? "

" Certainly. It is our duty to do everythink in our power to alleviate misery and help the wretched. Poor devil, he couldn't be more wretched dead than he is alive, by the looks of him. If he goes it will be a merciful release."

" Amen ! " says the old gentleman, closing his eyes. " Besides, he'll scarcely know."

" Know ! " repeated the younger party. " As soon as he's took three sips of his beer he'll know nothink until we've got him strapped safe on the operating table. Before you can say one o'clock we'll have the knife into him and take a good look round his inside."

The old gentleman nods as complacent as if they were talking of sirloin.

" But I mean," says he, " he won't suffer no particular pain ? "

" Not in a way of speaking he won't," says the younger party. " And, of course, if he slips through our fingers—as the chances are he may, weakened with want and exposure—he'll feel still less. But "—he laughs a horrible, inhuman laugh—" you can't carve a man open and saw the top of his head off for nothink."

" Still," says the old gentleman, " science demands

it ; and no sacrifice is too great to lay at the altar of human knowledge. You say the beer's all right ? "

" Quite. A sip or two will settle him. Besides, the sangwiches will act too."

" Very well," says the old gentleman ; " let's have them in without delay."

And he rung a electric bell.

If I was to try to describe what a effect this conversation made upon my distracted mind I should fail ignominious. Words in common parlance is powerless to express what I passed through as I hears these two discuss me, and I gazed horror-struck from one to the other. I trembles like a aspen ; my knees shook as never had I known them shake before, even in the presence of the police ; my stomach folds up literal like a carpet-bag ; my mouth goes dry ; the sweat rolls out of my body in cascades ; my brow trickles icy cold. Them two was plotting to take foul advantage of my helpless condition and perform a sanguinary operation on me under the effects of some deadly narcotic. They was going to open me out, to saw the top of my head off ; nay—they knew it theirselves—they was going to kill me ; to do an act of cold-blooded murder in the name of science. And I had neither hearing to help me nor voice to defend myself. I was as good as a corpse already, defunct and buried promiscuous.

In comes a manservant with a tray and never so much as looks at me nor notices I'm there. He puts the tray on the table, addresses a respectful enquiry to the old gentleman, bows his head, and goes out, shutting the door behind him. I am left alone to my

horrible fate ; to them two inhuman monsters ; this deadly tankard of beer, leering at me with its murderous smile ; these insidious sangwiches. My head swims.

The old gentleman hisself, with a deception terrible to witness, pours out a brimming glass of beer, and orders me to the table with a unnerving gesture. The younger party lifts his foot on to a chair and watches me with the eye of a eagle ; his talons, playing with the pocketful of coppers and suchlike once more, is itching to bury theirselves in my gore. I rises tottering from the edge of my chair and tears flushes to my eyes. I could not see nothink through them. The beer and the sangwiches, the old gentleman and the younger party, was washed out of observation. I clasps my bit of pencil and hugs my beloved slate—my last strength and refuge.

" KIND SIR," I traced with a shaking hand. " I AM TEETOTAL, PARDON ME."

The old gentleman looks at the words and looks (I knows it) at the younger party as much as to say : " What now ? "

" Give him a sangwich," says the younger party. " That'll do as good."

The old gentleman hands me a sangwich with his fingers. I stands on Death's own doorstep at this moment. My feeble and tortured fingers refused to do their expected work. I bursts into tears. The old gentleman looks at me in stern surprise and turns enquiring to the younger party. I takes advantage of his movement to ply my feverish pencil again.

" HONOURED SIR," I writes, " PARDON THIS SUDDEN

ILLNESS. I WILL NOW TAKE LEAVE, THANK YOU, KIND SIR."

He runs his gaze over the slate, and his eyebrows rose up.

"What is the matter with you?" he writes.

"NATURAL CAUSES AGGRAVATED BY NEGLECT," I replies. "GOOD-BYE, HONOURED FRIEND."

He writes:

"You do not leave until you have had some refreshment."

And once more he proffers me the poisoned sangwich.

"If he won't take that," says the younger party, "we shall have to chloroform him. That's all."

"Certainly," replies the old gentleman. "We will leave no stone unturned to try and restore his speech and hearing." And he presses the sangwich on me with sickening persuasion. My knees was giving way. There was just one chance of safety. I makes a desperate shot at the slate.

"HONOURED SIR," I writes, "SOMETHINK STRANGE IS GOING ON INSIDE OF ME. I BELIEVE MY FACULTIES IS RETURNING. GOD BLESS YOU IF IT IS SO."

He looks at the words and holds them out to the younger party. Neither of them moves a muscle.

"It had better BE so!" writes the old gentleman. "I give you three minutes." And, laying down the slate, he pulls out his watch and fixed his malevolent gaze on the moving hands.

Three minutes to recover the possession of faculties that's been dormant since twelve and a half years. Think of it! Three minutes to be resurrected out of the grave of lifelong affliction! What a struggle!

What a beating of the heart! What bursting of blood-vessels! What a outpouring of strenuous pores! What a century of straining suspense! With a swelling neck and a bloodshot eye I fixes the old gentleman's face as he noted his watch. Somethink gives way in my jaw; somethink seems to crack sudden inside of my head. Him and me come to the point together. He raises his head, and the words bursts out simultaneous from my labouring lips:

"GOD BLESS YOU, HONOURED SIR!" I cries. "MY FACULTIES IS COME BACK!"

"Very good," says he. And, reaching out his hand, he drains the glass of beer at three hearty gulps, and smacks his lips appreciative. "That's as it should be. That's how we wished it to be. That's how it has been already in the course of my long career."

He sets back the glass and lays hold of the slate.

"This," says he, "will be left here as a evidence of your miraculous recovery. You will be photographed before you go, my friend, and before very long your face will be published in my book on the use and abuse of public charity. In less than an hour you will be well advised to take a good smart walk as far away from this town as possible, though I'm aware I ought to hand you over to the police by rights. You will beg again, of course, for such chaps as you is incorrigible mendicants, incorrigible tramps, and incorrigible rogues; but the law is close on your heels, and you will have to be smart to evade it. Nothink but honest work will be a ultimate refuge for honest men. The sooner you try and learn the meaning of them two words, honesty and toil, the

better for you, and for the world you're born in. Do you hear? "

I did, damn him! A poor compensation it was, too, for recovered faculties.

"Now," says he, "we'll take your picture."

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